



The Significance of Immigration in the Formation of an American Identity

Rudolph J. Vecoli

The History Teacher, Vol. 30, No. 1. (Nov., 1996), pp. 9-27.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0018-2745%28199611%2930%3A1%3C9%3ATSOIT%3E2.0.CO%3B2-7>

The History Teacher is currently published by Society for the History of Education.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/history.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

The Significance of Immigration in the Formation of an American Identity*

Rudolph J. Vecoli
University of Minnesota

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA was a state, before it became a nation. The American Revolution was not an uprising of a subject people, but a throwing off of oppressive British rule on the part of a congeries of interest groups and political factions. The motto "E Pluribus Unum" (From Many, One) has come to be interpreted as the forging of one people from the diversity of many ethnic, racial, and religious elements, but at the time of its adoption in 1776, it expressed the aspiration that the thirteen former colonies would merge into a unitary state.¹

Still the American population in 1790 was hardly homogeneous. To begin with, almost nineteen percent was of African ancestry, another twelve percent Scot and Scots-Irish and ten percent German, with smaller numbers of French, Irish, and Welsh; the English stock comprised only forty-eight percent. This enumeration, of course, does not include the Indians. Although the British made up a clear majority, given the marked differences among English, Scots, Scots-Irish, and Welsh, it is a fiction to attribute a common nationality to such a motley crew. In short, America

* Originally presented at the conference "Making America: The Comparative Experience of Immigration in Brazil, the United States and Latin America," Sao Paulo, Brazil, August 16-18, 1993. Previously published as "El significado de la inmigración en la forjación de una identidad americana," *Estudios Migratorios Latinoamericanos*, 8 (1993), 315-36.

was already a “complex ethnic mosaic,” divided into segregated, quarrelsome groups by culture, language, religion, and race.²

Having achieved independence the task of nation-building was still ahead for the leaders of the new republic. As former colonials, they nourished an Anglophobia against their recent imperial masters and aspired to creating a distinct American nationality. Lacking deep roots in the soil, ancient ties of blood, and recourse to “mystic chords of memory,” such a national identity could be fashioned only from the Enlightenment ideals which had inspired the Declaration of Independence and informed the Constitution. Given these assumptions regarding the universal nature of mankind and the doctrine of natural rights, one became an American by choice, not by descent. What was asked of the aspirant was not an oath of fealty to a sovereign but a commitment to the principles of American government. Thus American identity was defined from the beginnings of the country as ideological in nature.³

When drafted in 1787 the Constitution of the United States did not define citizenship. The only distinction it made between natural born and naturalized citizens is that the latter were to be ineligible for the presidency. It authorized the Congress to establish “an uniform rule of naturalization,” and by an act of 1790, the criteria for naturalization were established: a residence of two years (subsequently changed to five years); good character; and the taking of an oath to support the Constitution—and in the language of the naturalization certificate—to “absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to every foreign Prince, Potentate, State or Sovereignty.” Over the course of two centuries, these liberal requirements have enabled millions of immigrants to become American citizens.⁴

The 1790 law, however, also specified that naturalization was to be available to “any alien, *being a free white person* [italics mine].” By this provision not only were blacks ineligible for citizenship, but also immigrants of other races when they began to arrive later in the nineteenth century. During Reconstruction, an Act of 1870 extended the privilege of naturalization to “aliens of African nativity and to persons of African descent,” but shortly thereafter the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 explicitly excluded Chinese immigrants from acquiring citizenship. The United States, however, has followed the principle of *jus soli* rather than *jus sanguinis*, i.e., the citizenship of a child is determined by its country of birth not by that of the parents. Thus even American-born children of immigrant parents who were denied citizenship—or illegally entered the country—were citizens by birthright. Yet by a curious anomaly, until 1924 native-born Indians who maintained tribal ties were denied citizenship on the fiction that they were members of “alien nations.”⁵

Even prior to the mass immigrations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Anglo Americans (i.e., descendants of the original British colonists) had reified race into categories of human beings who were to be admitted or excluded from the citizenry of the republic on the basis of skin color. From its origins, the inclusive ideological definition of American identity had begun to be trimmed and carved to fit the exclusive racial and ethnic features of the dominant group. Since 1820, recurring waves of immigration totaling over fifty-five million persons have inundated the country. Coming from all corners of the globe, these newcomers have included representatives of practically all cultures, races, and religions on earth. Such an iridescent procession of humanity was again and again to test and strain the absorptive capacity of the republic and of its founding principle that “all men are created equal.”⁶

A brief characterization of the main contours of the three major waves of immigration will suggest the complexity of this challenge. During the first wave (1841-1890), a total of almost fifteen million arrivals were recorded. Of these, over four million were Germans, three millions Irish, another three millions British, and a million Scandinavians. A second wave (1891-1920) brought an additional eighteen plus million immigrants of which almost four million were from Italy, three and six tenths million from Austria-Hungary, and three million from Russia (those from Austria-Hungary and Russia were almost entirely Slavs and Jews). The intervening decades from 1920 to 1960 were marked by a hiatus in immigration due to U.S. restrictive policies, economic depression, and war. The third wave, which began in 1965 and is still in progress has totaled approximately sixteen millions; of whom, some twenty-four percent came from Mexico, another twenty-four percent from Central and South American and the Caribbean, and thirty-five percent from Asia. While almost ninety percent of the first two waves originated in Europe, only twelve percent of the third did.⁷

Such gross figures do not begin to hint at the wide spectrum of races, cultures, and religions which have been introduced into American society through these periodic infusions of new blood. The 1990 United States Census provides a glimpse of the complexity of the ethnic makeup of the American people today. In response to the question “What is your ancestry or ethnic origin?” over ninety percent answered with at least one specific ancestry. The responses were tabulated for 215 ancestry groups. Not surprisingly, the largest ancestry groups by far were the German, Irish, English, and Afro-American, all of which reported over twenty millions. Other groups reporting over six million were the Italian, Mexican, French, Polish, American Indian, Dutch, and Scotch-Irish, while another twenty-one groups reported over a million each. Scanning

the roster of ancestries gives one a sense of the plethora of smaller groups represented in the American population: Maltese, Basque, Rom, Windish, Paraguayan, Belzian, Guyanese, Yemeni, Khmer, Micronesian, and so on. For what is it worth, only five percent gave the response "American."⁸ Another indication of increased diversity is the fact that there are now some three million Muslims in the United States. What began as a strictly Protestant country, and gradually made room for Catholics and Jews, now must accommodate Muslims, Bhuddists, and Hindus as well. The mosque and temple have joined the church and synagogue as houses of worship in many American cities.⁹

What is the meaning of all this for an American identity? The immigration and naturalization policies pursued by a country are a key to understanding its self-conception as a nation. By determining whom to admit to residence and citizenship, the ruling element defines the future ethnic and racial composition of the population and body politic. Each of the three great waves of immigration has inspired much soul-searching and intense debate over the consequences for the republic. Americans have been of at least two minds regarding the inpouring of millions of immigrants.

The notion of America as an asylum for the oppressed of the world has exerted a powerful influence on their minds and hearts. In 1776, in his tract, *Common Sense*, the pamphleteer Thomas Paine first defined America's special mission: "Every spot of the Old World is overrun with oppression. Freedom has been hunted round the globe.... O! receive the fugitive and prepare in time an asylum for mankind."¹⁰ And let it be said that it was flattering to the national ego that the United States was the Promised Land to the poor and persecuted of the Old World. Emma Lazarus expressed this sentiment in her sonnet, "The New Colossus" (1883) which was written to help raise funds for the base of the Statue of Liberty:

"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp," proclaims the Mother of Exiles,
 "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe
 free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless,
 the tempest-tossed to me. I lift my lamp beside the Golden Door."¹¹

Of course, more practical reasons for a free and unlimited immigration were cited by its proponents. For much of American history, immigrants have constituted an essential source of labor and initiative as workers, farmers, and merchants for an expanding economy.

For many Americans, however, unrestricted immigration has posed a manifold threat to the stability of the social order, the standard of living of

native workers, the health of the body politic, and the national identity. Thomas Jefferson, for example, objected to the encouragement of immigration on the grounds that coming from absolute monarchies, the emigrants would infuse their spirit into American public life and render it “a heterogeneous, incoherent, distracted mass.”¹² Those moved by such fears and anxieties have intermittently mounted anti-immigrant, nativist movements which at certain moments in American history have gained significant political power. As one might expect the strength of such xenophobic campaigns has waxed and waned in rhythm with the volume of immigration, but even more with the general state of the economy and society. Although the targets of nativist attacks changed over time, a constant theme has been the danger posed by foreigners to American values and institutions.¹³

During the first wave, Irish Catholics in particular were accused of constituting such a peril. Not only did their brawling and drinking offend Yankee sensibilities, as Catholics they were viewed as minions of the Pope and enemies of the Protestant character of the country. Samuel F.B. Morse, artist, inventor, and writer, passionately articulated this sentiment in his tract, *Immminent Dangers to the Free Institutions of the United States Through Foreign Immigration...* (1835). Perceiving in the arrival of great numbers of Roman Catholics (“human priest-controlled machines”) a Jesuit conspiracy to destroy American democracy, Morse advocated that foreigners henceforth be denied the right of suffrage.¹⁴ The Protestant Crusade against Catholic immigration culminated with the formation of the American (or Know-Nothing) Party in 1854 whose battle cry was “America for the Americans!” In this slogan was embodied an exclusive definition of the national identity, one which sought to preserve its Protestant character. Abraham Lincoln commented upon this departure from the country’s founding charter: “As a nation, we began by declaring that ‘*all men are created equal.*’ We now practically read it ‘all men are created equal, ‘*except negroes.*’ When the Know-Nothings get control, it will read ‘all men are created equal, except negroes, *and foreigners and catholics.*’”¹⁵ The Know-Nothing movement was swallowed up by the sectional strife which resulted in the Civil War. However, anti-Catholicism continued to be a powerful strain of nativism until well into the 20th century. In fact, one can say that only with the election of John F. Kennedy as president in 1960 was the redefinition of the American identity to include Roman Catholics fully realized.

Despite episodes of xenophobia, during the first century of its existence the United States welcomed with minimal regulation all comers. In 1882, however, two statutes were enacted which initiated a process of gradual tightening of restrictions upon entry into the country. The first

established qualitative health and moral standards by excluding criminals, prostitutes, lunatics, idiots, and paupers. The second, the Chinese Exclusion Act, which was the result of a virulently racist movement centered on the West Coast, denied admission to Chinese laborers and barred Chinese immigrants from acquiring citizenship. Following the enactment of this law, agitation for exclusion of Asians continued as Japanese and others arrived, culminating in the provision of the Immigration Law of 1924 which denied entry to aliens ineligible for citizenship, in effect all Asians.¹⁶ If Lincoln had still been alive, he could have amended his critique of nativism to include Asians among those excluded from the proposition that “all men are created equal.” During and after World War II, a combination of international politics and democratic idealism finally secured the elimination of all racial restrictions from immigration and naturalization policies.

In the late nineteenth century, “scientific” racialism, rooted in Social Darwinism, became a major tenet of Anglo American ethnonationalism. Yankee ideologues, such as Henry Cabot Lodge, justified imperialism abroad and immigration restriction at home in terms of Anglo-Saxon superiority. By then the second immigrant wave was beginning to wash over the country, bringing with it new and strange peoples from eastern Europe, the Balkans, and the Mediterranean. The increasing presence of Italians, Jews, Poles, Slovaks, Croatians, Greeks, Syrians, and other nationalities aroused alarm on the part of Anglo Americans. The Boston Brahmin author, Henry James, having returned to the United States in 1904 after an absence of twenty years was shocked by the overwhelming “alienism” of New York City. “What meaning,” he asked, “can continue to attach to such a term as the ‘American’ character?”—what type, as a result of such a prodigious amalgam, such a hodge-podge of racial ingredients, is to be conceived as shaping itself...in the cauldron of the “American’ character”?¹⁷

Many thought the outcome should be predetermined by a selective screening of the ingredients. In advocating a literacy test for immigrants, Senator Lodge placed his argument squarely on racial grounds: “The races most affected by the...test are those whose emigration to this country has begun within the last twenty years and swelled rapidly to enormous proportions, races with which the English-speaking people have never hitherto assimilated, and who are most alien to the great body of the people of the United States.”¹⁸ This campaign against “undesirable and dangerous immigrants,” i.e., southern and eastern Europeans, succeeded in securing Congressional enactment of the literacy test requirement on three occasions only to have it encounter a presidential veto each time. President Woodrow Wilson invoked older ideals in his veto mes-

sage; the literary test, he asserted, would close the “gates of ayllum” and “impose tests [not] of quality or of character or personal fitness, but tests of opportunity.”¹⁹

World War I, however, aroused an intense patriotism which expressed itself in demands for “One Hundred Percent Americanism” and attacks upon “hyphenated Americans,” German-Americans in particular. Former President Theodore Roosevelt expressed this uncompromising standard of conformity: “We of America form a new nationality!... Either a man is an American and nothing else,” he declared, “or he is not an American at all.”²⁰ This anti-immigrant climate not only insured the passage of the literacy test over a presidential veto, but prepared the way for the Immigration Acts of 1921 and 1924 which established quota systems designed to drastically reduce the number of southern and eastern Europeans and to bar all Asians. The eugenic argument that these inferior breeds were polluting the American germ plasm carried great weight in the Congressional debates as did the contention that foreigners were the bearers of radical ideologies. These statutes sought to freeze the biological and ideological identity of the American people by protecting them from contamination from abroad.²¹

For forty years, the United States, with minor modifications, pursued this restrictive immigration policy. However, the Immigration Act of 1965 put the country on a radically new course, with results which at the time were not foreseen. Under this law, the National Origins Quota system was done away with; instead totals of 170,000 and 120,000 immigrants per year were allocated respectively to the Eastern and Western hemispheres with a maximum of 20,000 visas to any one country (initially applied to the Eastern Hemisphere, but extended to the Western Hemisphere in 1978). Signing the bill at the Statue of Liberty, President Lyndon B. Johnson hailed it as a return to “the finest of [American] traditions”; while the law corrected an old injustice, he thought it would have few practical consequences. He was mistaken. In fact, the law of 1965 opened the gates to the third wave of immigration. Not only has the annual volume of immigration since increased steadily to the current level of a million or more arrivals a year, but as has been noted the newcomers are now predominantly Asian and Latin American.²²

The cumulative impact of an immigration of sixteen plus million since 1965 has aroused intense concerns regarding the demographic, cultural and racial future of the American people. The visibility of the newcomers, their color, languages, and lifestyles, has triggered a latent xenophobia in the American psyche. While eschewing the overt racism of earlier years, advocates of tighter restriction have expressed anxiety that the immigrants posed a threat to the racial and cultural “homogeneity” of the

United States, i.e., to its nationhood. Citing demographic projections, they admonished that if current rates of immigration continued, the “minorities” (persons of African, Asian, and “Hispanic” ancestry) would make up about half the American population by the year 2050 and the United States would cease to be “a predominantly white society rooted in Western culture.”²³ In such forebodings, one could hear the echoes of the racialism of Madison Grant, whose *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916) warned of the imminent decline of the Nordic people before the onslaught of prolific but inferior “races.”

While Americans in general did not subscribe to such racist ideas, their unease was registered in public opinion polls which reported a majority in favor of reducing immigration. *Newsweek* magazine of August 9, 1993 had as on its cover the Statue of Liberty up to its nose in water surrounded by small boats presumably containing would-be immigrants. The cover story was titled: “Immigration Backlash.” In response to the question “Is immigration a good thing or a bad thing for this country today?,” sixty percent of those polled responded “bad thing.” The results of the poll were interpreted to mean that Americans believe that immigrants are a threat to their jobs in a declining economy, and are flooding the welfare rolls and heavily involved in crime. In addition, the article concluded that Americans “are clearly uncomfortable with the fact that almost all the New Immigrants come from Latin American, the Caribbean, and Asia.”²⁴

As in the past, the intensity of the current nativist mood can be correlated with the general health of the society and economy. In the 1990s, increased violence, crime, and ethnic/racial conflict coupled with economic recession and unemployment has Americans worried. As in the past, immigrants are handy scapegoats.

The larger question which these successive waves of immigration have posed is how would they affect the character of the country? How would they redefine the national identity? Over the centuries several possible models of a social order comprised of a variety of ethnic and racial groups have competed for dominance in the republic. One was a society based on caste, a society divided into the free and the slave. Such a social order based on slavery existed in the South for two hundred years. While the Civil War destroyed the legal basis of bondage, the Jim Crow system of segregation continued caste relations based on race for another hundred years. But this caste model was not limited to black-white relations in the southern states. Industrial capitalism also created a caste-like structure in the cities and towns of the North. For a century prior to the New Deal, power, wealth, and status were concentrated in the hands of an Anglo-American elite; meanwhile the workers, comprised largely of immigrants, were the helots of the factory system. Residential

and social segregation were as much as reality in the industrial cities of the North as it was in the rural areas of the South.²⁵

The caste model crumbled and finally collapsed in both the North and the South in the twentieth century before the onslaught of economic expansion, technological change, and geographic and social mobility. But the seeds of its destruction had been planted in 1776. No one has taken the phrase, “all men are created equal...endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness” more seriously than those who have been denied those rights. The framework of the civic culture, the basic freedoms and rights (although too often denied) of speech, religion, assembly, and due process of law, created the arena within which the struggle took place, and many Anglo Americans committed to the idea of an egalitarian society took part in the struggle. But freedom, i.e., the enjoyment of equal rights, has not been a gift bestowed upon blacks, immigrants, women, and other marginalized people; they have had to struggle for it. The history of the American labor movement, of the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, and of populist politics is the history of that struggle.²⁶

If conscious apologists of a caste society, other than defenders of slavery, were uncommon among the Anglo-American elite, advocates of Anglo-conformity were many. Emboldened by a conviction of their cultural and even biological superiority, they demanded that immigrants abandon their distinctive linguistic, cultural, even religious, traits and take on in every respect the Anglo-American character. Among the early inventors of an American nationality, George Washington stated that immigrants would be expected to shed their “language, habits, and principles” and assimilate “to our customs, measures and laws: in a word, soon become *one people*.” Or as John Quincy Adams put it: immigrants “must cast off the European skin, never to resume it. They must look forward to their posterity rather than backward to their ancestors; they must be sure that whatever their own feelings may be, those of their children will cling to the prejudices of this country.”²⁷

As the dominant ethnocultural group, Anglo Americans were in a position to establish the rules of the game. But at the same time that they expected foreigners to conform to their values and lifestyles, they erected barriers which severely limited social intercourse. As Milton Gordon described the experience of immigrants who took at face value the invitation to join Anglo-American society: “What at a distance seemed to be a quasi-public edifice flying only the all-inclusive flag of American nationality turned out, on closer inspection, to be the clubhouse of a particular ethnic group—the white Anglo-Saxon Protestants....” Gordon further observes: “Structural assimilation [i.e., primary and intimate so-

cial interaction]...turned out to be the rock on which the ship of Anglo-conformity foundered.”²⁸ While proclaiming an inclusive Anglo-American identity, the Yankees sought to segregate themselves in exclusive neighborhoods, churches, clubs, and schools. Those who did not meet the standards of racial and ethnic acceptability were excluded.

The ideology of Anglo-conformity long influenced public policies particularly in the sphere of education. One of the primary objectives of the public school system of the United States has been the assimilation of children of foreign, lower class backgrounds to Anglo-American middle class values and behaviors. As a leading educator of the early twentieth century. Ellwood P. Cubberly, put it: “Our task is...to assimilate and amalgamate these people [southern and eastern Europeans] as a part of our American race, and to implant in their children, so far as can be done, the Anglo-Saxon conception of righteousness, law and order, and popular government, and to awaken in them a reverence for our democratic institutions and for those things in our national life which we as a people hold to be of abiding worth.”²⁹

While the authority of Anglo-conformity has been severely challenged in recent decades, it has demonstrated a renewed vigor in the contemporary controversy regarding bilingual education. The teaching of immigrant children in their mother tongue, even as a means of transition to English, has aroused fears that America will become a linguistically fragmented country. Spanish-speaking groups, because of their numbers, geographical concentration, and resistance to linguistic assimilation, are seen as posing a particular threat to the dominance of the English language. Alistair Cooke, himself an immigrant, has warned in his clipped English accent: “The day that the immigrant’s mother tongue becomes the first language of any community or—God forbid—a State, the American experiment will be on its way to breaking up into a collection of feuding German republics, with several Quebecs in our future.”³⁰ Ignorant of the country’s linguistic history, Cooke and others assert that former immigrants speedily and gladly Anglicized, and Hispanics must do likewise. US English has lobbied for years for a constitutional amendment which would make English the official language of the United States. While unsuccessful at the national level, the movement has secured its goal in seventeen states. Vigorous opposition has been mounted by an “English Plus” coalition of Hispanic organizations, educators, and cultural pluralists which contends that imposed linguistic conformity violates the rights of non-English speakers and is in any case unnecessary given the overwhelming Anglicization of American culture.³¹

Undoubtedly the “melting pot” has been most often invoked as symbolizing the process whereby the polyglot, diverse elements in the Ameri-

can population were to be transmuted into a new race. There have been many variants of this ideology of assimilation, including one in which the Anglo American is the cook stirring and determining the heat and ingredients. For example, while Theodore Roosevelt subscribed to the melting pot idea, he also insisted that “the crucible in which all the new types are melted into one was shaped from 1776 to 1789, and our nationality was definitely fixed in all its essentials by the men of Washington’s day”³² The prevailing concept, however, has been one in which the final product is a distinctive amalgam of all the varied cultures and peoples. The original expression of this idea is to be found in Michel Guillaume Jean de Crevecoeur’s “*What is an American, this new man,*” an essay in his volume, *Letters from an American Farmer*, published in 1782. A well-educated Frenchman of the petite nobility, Crevecoeur had in fact lived as a farmer and naturalized citizen of the colony of New York prior to returning to France. For our purpose the passage from this extraordinary work is that which answers the question posed:

He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds.... Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world.³³

Crevecoeur attributed this transformation to the ready availability of land, the mild and benevolent form of government, and the absence of religious and national hatreds making for easy intermingling and intermarriage.

The idea of a melting of peoples into an American race was commonly employed in the nineteenth century as an optimistic rationale for a liberal immigration policy. Ralph Waldo Emerson, the transcendentalist philosopher, for example, in denouncing the Native American Party, proclaimed:

As in the old burning of the Temple of Corinth, by the melting and intermixture of silver and gold and other metals a new compound more precious than any, called the Corinthian brass, was formed; so in this continent—asylum of all nations—the energy of Irish, Germans, Swedes, Poles, and Cossacks, and all the European tribes—of the Africans, and of the Polynesians—will construct a new race, a new religion, a new state, a new literature, which will be as vigorous as the new Europe that came out of the smelting-pot of the Dark Ages....³⁴

The historian, Frederick Jackson Turner, also anticipated the melting pot metaphor in his essay on the “Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1893). As a corollary to his thesis that the westward movement

had been the primary force in shaping American institutions, values and character, Turner also argued that the frontier had produced a “composite nationality for the American people.” In his words: “In the crucible of the frontier the immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race, English in neither nationality nor characteristics.”³⁵

However, it was Israel Zangwill’s play, “The Melting Pot” (1909), which captured the popular imagination and imbedded the term itself in the American lexicon. An English Jewish writer, Zangwill has his character, David Quixano, a Russian Jewish composer, who is writing the “American symphony” declaim:

America is God’s Crucible, the great Melting Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and re-forming! Here you stand, good folk, think I, when I see them at Ellis Island, here you stand in your fifty groups, with your fifty languages and histories, and your fifty blood hatreds and rivalries. But you won’t be long like that, brothers, for these are the fires of God you’ve come to—these are the fires of God. A fig for your feuds and vendettas! Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians—into the Crucible with you all! God is making the American.³⁶

Belief in the efficacy of the melting pot became a major tenet of a progressive assimilationist attitude towards foreigners. When Henry Pratt Fairchild, sociologist, wrote a book advocating immigration restriction, he entitled it *The Melting Pot Mistake* (1926). Although the Melting Pot ideology came under sharp attack in the 1960s as standing for a coercive policy of assimilation, it still has its staunch advocates, academic and political. It was one of President Ronald Reagan’s favorite clichés; and from another point on the political spectrum, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., has written a brief for the Melting Pot in his polemic, *The Disuniting of America* (1991). The *Newsweek* article referred to above put the following question in its poll: “Is the U.S. still a melting pot, or do immigrants today maintain their national identity more strongly?” Never mind that the question itself is loaded, the fact that only twenty percent replied “still a melting pot” while sixty percent replied “maintain identity” was cited as a negative against the current immigrants.³⁷ Notwithstanding its importance as a symbol, the melting pot has little value as a descriptive or analytical concept. As Milton Gordon has said, it “has been something of an illusion...which exhibited a considerable degree of sociological naiveté.”³⁸

The obsession with assimilation, whether under the guise of Anglo-conformity or the “melting pot,” revealed an underlying anxiety regarding the consequences of mass immigration for American society. In fact, neither ideology was able to come to grips with the multifarious ethnic

and racial diversity of America. Although Walt Whitman in his ecstatic embrace of life, sang the praises of a “nation of nations,” no American in the nineteenth century formulated a theory of pluralism. A philosopher, Horace Kallen, drawing upon his Jewish lore, rose to the occasion in an article, “Democracy versus the Melting Pot,” (*The Nation*, 1915). Taking as his point of departure, the reality of vibrant immigrant communities, Kallen argued against the necessity, indeed the desirability, of cultural assimilation, offering a vision of America as a “great republic consisting of a federation or commonwealth of nationalities.” Disputing the concept of an “American race,” he insisted on the “psychophysical inheritance” of peoples which was ancestrally determined. Thus: “Men may change their clothes, their politics, their wives, their religions, their philosophies...they can not change their grandfathers. Jews or Poles or Anglo-Saxons, in order to cease being Jews or Poles or Anglo-Saxons, would have to cease to be.” While sharing a common citizenship, the various ethnic groups should maintain and foster their particular languages and cultures. Kallen described “American civilization” metaphorically as an orchestra in which each “ethnic group is the natural instrument, its spirit and culture the theme and melody, and the harmony and dissonances and discords of them all make up the symphony of civilization....”³⁹ Among the adherents of Kallen’s concept (which came to be known as cultural pluralism), none was more eloquent than Randolph Bourne. In an essay, “Trans-national America,” he declared the melting pot a failure, contending that coercive assimilation was producing a race of “cultural half-breeds” and that the crusade against the hyphenate stimulated a counter-nationalism on the part of ethnic groups. Bourne hailed the promise of a “cosmopolitan America” which would serve as an example of a “world federation in miniature.”⁴⁰ Writers within ethnic communities, such as Waldemar Ager, a Norwegian-American journalist and reformer, also took up the cudgels against the melting pot.⁴¹ With the coming of World War I, the advocates of One Hundred Percent Americanism drowned out these voices; but this vision of a democratic pluralist society would reemerge at a more propitious time.

By undermining the legitimacy of dominant orthodoxies, the depression of the 1930s opened the way for an aesthetic as well as political revolution. Cultural democracy emerged as the guiding motif of the artistic and intellectual activities of the decade. As an expression of the populist ethos, plain people, farmers, workers, and a wide range of ethnic and racial groups became the subjects of novels and plays, paintings and murals. Voices of ethnic diversity challenged Anglo American cultural hegemony as ethnic writers and artists explored and celebrated the lives of African Americans, Jewish Americans, Italian Americans, Slovak Americans, and others.⁴²

Among these, Louis Adamic, stands out, not because he was the better writer, but because he was a single-minded advocate of an America in which all cultural heritages would be equally valued. Adamic had emigrated from Slovenia at age fourteen and become a successful American writer. In a series of volumes and hundreds of lectures, he maintained that bigotry not only violated American ideals but injured the entire society as well as the individual. Adamic campaigned throughout the thirties for a new synthesis of the old and the new America, of Plymouth Rock and Ellis Island. Since his goal was mutual appreciation and respect among the country's diverse cultures, Adamic was a short term pluralist; for the long term he subscribed to a universalist ideal which he called pan-humanism.⁴³ Adamic's words and works received a positive reception, for many shared his worries about the ugly cleavages in American society against the backdrop of a world on the verge of fratricidal war.

Two decades of hot and cold wars blighted the brief efflorescence which the pluralist model enjoyed in the thirties. During the sixties, however, the surface consensus was destroyed by conflict and violence over issues of race, the Vietnam War, and morality. The causes of this "ungluing of America" were complex and profound, but certainly one was the collapse of Anglo-American hegemony. Popular confidence in the superior wisdom of the White Anglo Saxon Protestant (WASP) establishment, already eroded by the depression, crumbled with the unfolding tragedies in the jungles of Southeast Asia and the "mean streets" of American cities. Plain Americans, confronted with moral dilemmas to which public leaders appeared not to have answers, sought guidance and security in personal and communal sources of values. A heightened consciousness of ethnic differences caused many to reconsider their identity as Americans.⁴⁴

Along with other myths of the civil religion, the melting pot came under attack as a sham for Anglo-American dominance. A movement which has come to be known as the "revival of ethnicity" brought to the surface various expressions of cultural pluralism. A militant and proud assertion of ethnic identity became the order of the day not only for African Americans, Chicanos, and Asian Americans, but for Americans of European descent as well. Indicative of this mood was a newfound obsession of many Americans with a search for their roots. The "ethnic revival" did not signify a return to "authentic" Old World cultures, but as a synthesis of family traditions, communal memories, and new elements, it was no less authentic. The legitimation of diversity opened clogged channels of creativity, resulting in an outpouring of novels, films, plays, and poetry exploring the many American identities. Historians, social scientists and humanists recovered the experiences of ethnic groups,

celebrated the achievements of ethnic writers and artists, and traced the pervasive influence of diversity in all aspects of life. Pluralism became the paradigm of this new scholarship and ethnicity its key interpretive concept.⁴⁵

It appeared that Horace Kallen's vision was about to be realized; having cast off the shackles of Anglo-conformity and discarded the melting pot, the United States was transforming itself into a federation of ethnic and racial groups. However, in one of those sudden shifts of public sentiment which characterize modern societies, a conservative reaction in the 1980s reaffirmed a national identity based on patriotism and traditional morality. Perhaps the overriding anxiety which brought the "Moral Majority" together was fear of moral and social anarchy, exemplified by crime, street violence, and drug traffic. Among the circumstances which explain the return to the melting pot mood, however, was the dramatic increase in immigration—and the racial and cultural character of the new arrivals.⁴⁶

Although troubling, the strength of nativism in the contemporary United States should not be exaggerated. Newly arriving Asians and Central Americans receive a more cordial welcome than did Jews, Greeks or Poles at the turn-of-the-century. Although incidents of violence have marred their reception, the United States in recent years has been remarkably free of the vigilante attacks, oppression by police forces, and open bigotry to which the immigrants of yesteryear were subjected. Compared to the rabid and influential xenophobic movements in European countries, exponents of ethnic hatreds have not as yet attracted large followings among Americans. While racial prejudice and discrimination no doubt exist, racism as an ideology has been discredited, and Anglo-American conformity no longer has the compelling power it once did. The ethnic revival of the seventies helped create a greater sensitivity to and tolerance of cultural and racial differences.

Can we then draw up a balance sheet regarding the status of the various models of inter-ethnic and inter-racial relationships in American society? The caste system, we can safely conclude, is a thing of the past; this is not to say that the United States does not have a class structure marked by sharp differentials in power, wealth, and status. Anglo-conformity on the other hand is still alive and kicking, but its influence has waned greatly with the collapse of Anglo-American hegemony. The melting pot, as Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan told us thirty years ago, never happened.⁴⁷ But one can hardly jump to the conclusion that a Kallenesque pluralism prevails in the United States. The outcome is much more complicated. It is irrefutable that there is an American culture in which everyone, more or less, participates. But this is less due to a

political process of Americanization, than to the effects of mass production and popular culture. This American culture is also the product of syncretism, the melding of multiple cultural influences, as is obvious when one listens to American music, reads American literature, or views American movies. Yet contrary to expectations, ethnicity has not disappeared as a vital force in American life. Ethnic communities and cultures based on ancestry, race, culture, religion, and regionalism wield important influence on the values, lifestyles, and tastes of many Americans. In short, America combines in intricate ways cultural homogeneity and heterogeneity.⁴⁸

What then can we conclude regarding an American identity from this whirlwind tour of American immigration and ethnic history? National identity has been a contested terrain in the United States for over two hundred years, and it remains so today. Immigration has repeatedly rudely shaken the American ethnic kaleidoscope. Time and again it has challenged the revolutionary heritage of human equality. American attitudes and policies have oscillated between inclusive and exclusive responses, between generosity and niggardliness, between nativism and cosmopolitanism. Yet in historical perspective, it is clear that the definition of an American identity has been stretched again and again to accommodate new peoples. From a white, Protestant Anglo-American ethnonationalism, the frame has been enlarged to make room for Irish and German Catholics, then for Italians, Jews, and Slavs, and more recently for Asians and Latin Americans. I do not mean to suggest that this was accomplished without tension and conflict or that the United States has attained today the ideal society in which race, ethnicity, and religion do not matter. Yet the historical record gives one grounds for optimism. Since the eighteenth century it has been said that the American nationality is in the making. A trite observation, but nonetheless true. And the process continues.

Notes

1. Forrest McDonald. *E Pluribus Unum: The Formation of the American Republic, 1776-1790* (Boston, 1965); Gordon S. Wood. *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1969).

2. Russell R. Menard, "Migration, Ethnicity, and the Rise of an Atlantic Economy: The Re-Peopling of British America, 1600-1790," in *A Century of European Migrations, 1830-1930*, Rudolph J. Vecoli and Suzanne M. Sinke, eds. (Urbana and Chicago, 1991), pp. 58-77.

3. Philip Gleason. "American Identity and Americanization," in William Petersen, et al., *Concepts of Ethnicity* (Cambridge, MA, 1982); Arthur Mann, *The One and the Many. Reflections on the American Identity* (Chicago, 1979).

4. Rudolph Vecoli. "Immigration, Naturalization and the Constitution," *American Political Science Association, News for Teachers of Political Science*, 50 (Summer 1985): 9-16; James H. Kettner. *The Development of American Citizenship, 1608-1870* (Chapel Hill, 1978).

5. Leonard Dinnerstein. "The Supreme Court and the Rights of Aliens," *This Constitution*, 8 (Fall 1985): 24-35; Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, MA, 1981); on the Asian experience see Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore* (Boston, 1989).

6. The most recent and comprehensive history of American immigration is Roger Daniels, *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life* (New York, 1991).

7. Daniels. *Coming to America*; Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, ed., *Immigration Reconsidered* (New York, 1990); David Reimers, *Still the Golden Door: The Third World Comes to America* (New York, 1985).

8. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1990 Census of Population Supplementary Reports: Detailed Ancestry for States* (Washington, D.C., 1992).

9. Yvonne Y. Haddad and Adair T. Lummis, *Islamic Values in the United States* (New York, 1987); Martin E. Marty, *Pilgrims in Their Own Land: 500 Years of Religion in America* (Boston, 1984); Mary Bednarowski, *American Religion: A Cultural Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1984).

10. Thomas Paine, *Common Sense Addressed to the Inhabitants of America* (original ed. 1776; reprinted in *Thomas Paine: Common Sense and Other Political Writings*, Nelson F. Adkins, ed. (New York, 1953), p. 34.

11. Emma Lazarus. "The New Colossus," *The Poems of Emma Lazarus* (2 vols., Boston, 1889), I, pp. 202-203.

12. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on Virginia*, Query 8. Quoted in Milton Gordon. *Assimilation in American Life* (New York, 1964), p. 91.

13. David H. Bennett, *The Party of Fear: From Nativist Movements to the New Right in American History* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1988); John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1963).

14. Samuel F.B. Morse, *Imminent Dangers to the Free Institutions of the United States Through Foreign Immigration and the Present State of the Naturalization Laws* (New York, 1835). Quoted in Moses Rischin, ed., *Immigration and the American Tradition* (Indianapolis, 1976); for the history of anti-Catholic nativism see Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1868* (New York, 1952); on the Irish as objects of nativism see Dale T. Knobel, *Paddy and the Republic: Ethnicity and Nationality in Antebellum America* (Middletown, CT, 1986).

15. "One of 'Em," *The Wide-Awake Call: A Know-Nothing Token* (New York, 1855). Quoted in Arthur Mann, ed., *Immigrants in American Life: Selected Readings* (Boston, 1968), pp. 124-26; the Lincoln quote is from Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life*, p. 93.

16. On anti-Asian nativism see Roger Daniels, *The Politics of Prejudice: The Anti-Japanese Movement in California and the Struggle for Japanese Exclusion* (New York, 1969); Stuart C. Miller, *The Unwelcome Immigrant: The American Image of the Chinese, 1785-1882* (Berkeley, 1969); and Alexander P. Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley, CA, 1971).

17. Henry James, *The American Scene* (first printed 1907, Bloomington, 1968) p. 121.
18. Henry Cabot Lodge, *Congressional Record*, 1896, 54th Congress, 1st Session, XXVIII, 1816-20. Quoted in John J. Appel, ed., *The New Immigration* (New York, 1971), p. 127. On the anti-immigration position of Lodge and other Yankees see Barbara Solomon, *Ancestors and Immigrants: A Changing New England Tradition* (Cambridge, MA, 1956).
19. Wilson's veto of the literacy test bill of 1915 in U.S. Congress, House, *Congressional Record*, 63rd Cong., 3rd sess., Jan. 28, 1915, LII, 2481-82. Quoted in Rischin, *Immigration and the American Tradition*, p. 285.
20. Theodore Roosevelt, *Fear God and Take Your Part* (New York, 1916), pp. 141, 146.
21. Kenneth Ludmerer, "Genetics, Eugenics, and the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 46 (1972): 59-81; Stanley Coben, "A Study in Nativism: The American Red Scare of 1919-1920," *Political Science Quarterly*, 79 (1964): 52-75; Paul L. Murphy, "Intolerance in the 1920s," *Journal of American History*, 51 (1964): 60-76; Robert K. Murray, *Red Scare: A Study in National Hysteria, 1919-1920* (Minneapolis, 1955).
22. David M. Reimers, "An Unintended Reform: The 1965 Immigration Act and Third World Immigration to the United States," *Journal of American Ethnic History* (Fall, 1983), 9-28; Leon F. Bouvier and Robert W. Gardner, "Immigration to the U.S.: The Unfinished Story," *Population Bulletin*, 41 (November 1986); for President Johnson's address on the occasion of signing the bill see Rischin, *Immigration and the American Tradition*, pp. 448-50.
23. *Border Watch. Newsletter of The American Immigration Control Foundation* (May 1993), p.3. Leon Bouvier and John Martin, "Four Hundred Million Americans: The Latest Census Bureau Projections," *Center For Immigration Studies Background* (January 1993); Federation for American Immigration Reform, *Immigration Report*, XIII (January 1993), p. 1.
24. Tom Morganthau, "America: Still a Melting Pot?" *Newsweek* (August 9, 1993), 10-23.
25. E. Digby Baltzell, *An American Business Aristocracy* (New York, 1962); Id., *The Protestant Establishment: Aristocracy and Caste in America* (New York, 1964).
26. An excellent summary history of these struggles can be found in Joshua Freeman, et al., *Who Built America? Working People and the Nation's Economy, Politics, Culture, and Society* (2 vols., New York, 1992).
27. For concise descriptions of the ideologies of Anglo-conformity, the Melting Pot, and Cultural Pluralism see Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life*. The Washington quote is from Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America* (New York, 1991), pp. 24-25; John Quincy Adams, *Niles Weekly Register* (April 19, 1820), pp. 157-58, as quoted in Rischin, *Immigration and the American Tradition*, p. 47.
28. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life*, pp. 113-14.
29. Ellwood P. Cubberly, *Changing Conceptions of Education* (Boston, 1909), pp. 5-16, as quoted in Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life*, p. 98.
30. The quote from Alistair Cooke is from a letter on U.S. English, Inc. stationary bearing his signature.
31. The debate over bilingualism can be followed through the mailings and publications of U.S. English, Inc., English First, and English Plus. See also Jim Crawford, *Hold Your Tongue: Bi-Lingualism and the Politics of English Only* (Addison Wesley, 1992). On the linguistic history of the United States see Joshua Fishman, et al., *Language*

Loyalty in the United States (The Hague, 1966) and by Fishman, *The Rise and Fall of the Ethnic Revival: Perspectives on Language and Ethnicity* (Berlin, 1985); Margaret A. Lourie and Nancy F. Conklin, eds., *A Pluralistic Nation: The Language Issues in the United States* (Rowley, MA, 1978).

32. Quoted in Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life*, p. 122.
33. J. Hector St. John De Crevecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (first published 1782; New York, 1957), p. 39.
34. Quoted in Mann, *Immigrants in American Life*, p. 140.
35. Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1893* (Washington, D.C., 1893), p. 216.
36. Israel Zangwill, *The Melting-Pot, A Drama in Four Acts* (New York, 1909), quoted in Mann, *Immigrants in American Life*, pp. 141-42.
37. *Newsweek* (August 9, 1993), p. 19.
38. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life*, p. 129.
39. *The Nation*, C (February 25, 1915), 217-20, quoted in Appel, *The New Immigration*, pp. 121-22.
40. Randolph S. Bourne, *War and the Intellectuals: Collected Essays, 1915-1919*, Carl Resek, ed. (New York, 1964), pp. 107-23.
41. Odd S. Lovoll, ed., *Cultural Pluralism Versus Assimilation: The Views of Waldemar Ager*, (Northfield, MN, 1977).
42. Richard Weiss. "Ethnicity and Reform: Minorities and Ambiance of the Depression Years," *Journal of American History*, 66 (December 1979), 566-85; David Hollinger. "Ethnic Diversity, Cosmopolitanism and the Emergence of the American Liberal Intelligentsia," *American Quarterly*, 27 (1975), 133-51.
43. Among Louis Adamic's writings, the following are particularly pertinent: *My America, 1928-1938* (London, 1938); *From Many Lands* (New York, 1940); see also Rudolph J. Vecoli, "Louis Adamic and the Contemporary Search for Roots," *Ethnic Studies*, 2 (1978), 29-35.
44. Perry L. Weed, *The White Ethnic Movement and Ethnic Politics* (New York, 1973); Andrew Greeley, *Ethnicity in the United States* (New York, 1974); Mann, *One and the Many*.
45. William Greenbaum, "America in Search of a New Ideal: An Essay on the Rise of Pluralism," *Harvard Educational Review*, 44 (August 1974): 411-440; Michael Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* (New York, 1971); Rudolph J. Vecoli, "From *The Uprooted To The Transplanted: The Writing of American Immigration History, 1951-1989*," in *From 'Melting Pot' to Multiculturalism*," ed. Valeria Gennaro Lerda (Rome, 1990), pp. 22-53.
46. Rudolph J. Vecoli, "Return to the Melting Pot: Ethnicity in the United States in the Eighties," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 5 (Fall 1985): 7-20.
47. Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City*, 2d ed. (Cambridge, MA, 1972).
48. Kathleen Neils Conzen, et al. "The Invention of Ethnicity: A Perspective from the USA," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 12 (Fall 1992), 3-63; Werner Sollors, ed., *The Invention of Ethnicity* (New York, 1989).