

THE ASSIMILATION OF IMMIGRANTS IN AMERICAN SMALL TOWNS

IMMIGRANTS and persons of recent immigrant stock are more quickly assimilated in American small towns than in cities for at least one quite evident reason. The size and complex organisation of the city allow immigrants to group together and continue in the practice of their folkways. Almost any American city of sufficient size has a number of 'sections'—Italian, Hungarian, Polish, or other—the inhabitants of which continue to whatever extent is practicable the language, social customs, and even diet of their homelands. In the small town there do not exist the facilities for special ethnic ghettos of this kind, and the person of foreign origin is compelled to make an adaptation to American ways of doing things simply as a matter of survival. In the 'foreign sections' of even small cities one will find persons who came in with the last great wave of immigration in the early 1900's who still do not speak English—they live in a species of Limbo, without particular allegiance to their place of origin as a political and national entity, and enjoy only an economic nexus with their country of adoption. There is the classic story of the Chinaman who settled in the Polish quarter of Chicago and opened a laundry. After three years he felt that he had sufficiently mastered English to go on a sightseeing tour of the city. When he left his familiar neighbourhood he found that what he spoke was good idiomatic Polish.

However, these groups—whose segregation is to some extent voluntary—present no immediate problem in their retarded assimilation. They have been undergoing a natural attrition since the curtailment of immigration in 1924; if their children retain a fair number of foreign practices, these are alien to American ways in only the most superficial sense—brass bands at Italian funerals or several days of feasting at Slavic weddings; and there has never been the question of 'loyalty' which arises in European countries where there are minorities, merely because there is no conceivable benefit for an American national minority that would be contrary to the interests of the rest of the community. A possible exception to this is the Jews, whose identity, where it combines a religious with a national element, can endure beyond the process of Americanisation. But since the American form of government ideally allows for all extremes of dissidence short of treason, the Jew can, with perfectly good conscience and within his political rights, espouse a course of action, such as armed support of the Zionist state, lacking in any benefit for his Gentile compatriots.

Though its ideal politics are pluralistic, a democracy tends toward what might be called social monism. The pressure toward conformity in the American small town is proverbial; its stifling effects on the young man or woman who wishes to write novels is a standard subject of fiction. Some degree of social hostility the foreign-born person will inevitably meet in the small town: he is most obviously 'different', and the rustic suspicion of that is, after all, world-wide. There must be added to this the facts that the immigrant enters into the community, as a rule, at its lowest economic level and the American social system is a hierarchy determined by money. While money is far from being the best theoretical basis for extra-legal (that is, spontaneous) social organisation, in practice the system works well enough and without serious injustice: influence on all planes of community life tends to reside with those who have money, money is made by those with the talent for contributing to the material vigour of the community, and the social precedence allowed to wealth is (except in a very few cases) a recognition of functional status.

In the small town disparity of wealth is rarely great, and however subtle and numerous the gradations of rank attaching to wealth, the foreign-born settler in the small town, even beginning at the bottom, does not find himself at an impossible distance from an eventual position of some influence and honour. Since the small town, other than the mere suburban one, is more or less of an economic unit—though the one with a self-contained economy is rare—the economic progress of all its members is an interdependent affair, and there is no practical reason for trying to exclude the first- or second-generation immigrant from a share in this progress. Thus his acceptance into the community as an economic organisation is nearly automatic, and to the extent that he better himself in that organisation and acquires money, his social acceptance follows.

As his economic condition improves, he also becomes less 'different'. To begin with, he is in most cases a person from the lower economic levels in his native land, and so long as he remains on an equivalent level in America, he will follow the European practices dictated by the need to be frugal; but once he is financially better off he will begin to acquire the external indicia of what is called 'the American way of life': automobiles, electrical household gadgets, and frequent changes of short-lived clothing. Even his diet will be adjusted to the rich and tasteless American norm once he can afford to buy the innumerable prepared foods that are the gastronomical equivalents of the household gadgets.

Whether or not they are as a matter of fact, in popular thinking

these things are associated with the American political system and culture, so that the immigrant sees no need to hold on to the culture of his native place or his father's native place; in accepting the material benefits of America, he accepts the whole complex of which they are parts, committing himself to it beyond the possibility of reservations. These generalisations hold true, of course, only for recent years and already established towns. Those immigrants who settled new towns gave them a more enduring impress of European cultures. The non-English-speaking settlers of 19th-century towns were, in many instances, homogeneous groups, but, except in infrequent cases, these towns—most less than a hundred years old—have lost their homogeneity, owing to the mobility of the American population and the tendency of newly arrived ethnic groups to take over the lowest categories of labour. Even where there is a single continental-European racial strain, the town does not, naturally enough, exist outside of the national economic orbit and its attendant congerie of ideas and attitudes. A Middle Western town recently had much notice because it had been agitated by a dispute as to whether or not movies should be permitted to be shown there. Most of the inhabitants were of Dutch ancestry and were Calvinists as well, so that they were racially and ideologically as 'pure' as an American could be, yet the general substance of the comment on them seems to have been that they were acting in an un-American fashion in their disapproval of the movies.

Despite all the eulogies of the melting pot, the continental European has made no unique contributions to American culture. He has, certainly, given to America his aptitude for hard labour, his intelligence, his good will, and even his life's blood; but none of these is peculiar to him as a European and each has been entirely a personal contribution, derived from the individual rather than from the culture from which he came. The character of American culture was established (*in potentia*, that is—obviously there has been a great change) before the influx of non-English-speaking peoples began, and their coming seems to have affected the development of that culture chiefly in a negative way. The crudity of American English is explained by the language's having become a sort of *lingua franca* for persons with another mother tongue. In any given area, the larger the number of foreign-born and second-generation Americans, the more limited will be the general vocabulary and the less eloquent the manner of speech. This degeneration (both in the popular and the philological sense) of language is enduring, for when English becomes the mother tongue of the person of immigrant stock, his English already has behind it a corrupt tradition. In rural

areas where there are no large concentrations of persons of recent foreign origin the degeneration of English is less advanced, but is none the less steadily continuing, influenced by the radio and moving pictures, whose standards of speech largely derive from metropolitan norms.

This matter of speech indicates the nature of assimilation in general: it is a process of finding the least common denominator and of discarding what will not be reduced by it. It is most unjust to accuse the immigrant of being solely responsible for the decline of American culture; had there been one capable of a different kind of extension there is no reason to think he would not have taken it over; but that he has been a material cause in its decline seems plain enough. He has been a necessary part—a rapidly renewed source of cheap labour—in that great industrial and commercial expansion which, not to consider the other material factors, has been a strange dialectical development of the Calvinism long dominant in American thought; in his contribution to that expansion, he has helped to destroy the social and economic organisation within which American culture reached its brief apogee just prior to the Civil War.

The vast majority of American Catholics are of course of immigrant origin, recent or more remote (the peak of Irish immigration, for instance, was reached in 1851), but the immigrant Catholic has made no more contribution to American culture as a secular phenomenon *qua* Catholic than he has *qua* immigrant, and the reason for this is the same in either of his classifications. Obviously, to the extent that he is assimilated, the Catholic immigrant conforms to a pattern that is anything but Catholic in inspiration. By conforming to this (for him) alien pattern, he indicates his acceptance of the American dogma—recent enough in general acceptance—that religion is a private matter, none of whose tenets need cause dissension among persons of sufficient good will—a notion preposterous both as history and common sense. In a few matters, it is true, the Catholic has not been able to abstain from public statement where morals are most obviously concerned—for instance, in the legalising of birth control and the open display of obscenities. In the latter, particularly in the movies, Catholic opinion has very effectively manifested itself, though sometimes with less than discretion, since American Catholicism, with its largely Irish leadership, has a strong strain of Puritanism.

In the small town, however, Puritanism is hardly an occasion of offence, and the Catholic immigrant has in the popular identification of his faith with a Puritanical attitude (however little he himself

has a 'racial' inclination toward Puritanism) one more sign that he is not so different from everyone else. Anti-Catholic prejudice continues, to be sure, but it has lost its political complexion so far as it exists in the general populace, despite a new effort by a number of liberal-leftist Protestant clergymen and like-minded publicists to make the Church appear the main foe of American political liberty. But the small-town American, though he may believe that Catholic doctrines are all absurdities, is pragmatically minded and does not see that the presence of Catholics in his community has in any way impaired his freedom.

From what has been said it should be plain that the American assimilation of foreigners, especially as successfully practised in the small town, has been conditioned by the peculiarities of time and place. The immigrant was the necessary human material of the great period of America's expansion within her own territories; the reward for his services was his 'assimilation'—a political status which, after certain preliminaries, was no different from anybody else's and such an economic and social position as he could gain for himself within the confines of a system quite flexible, thanks to its basis in money. Since, from the immigrant's point of view, the process of adaptation was a simple one of moving from more to less complex cultural patterns, the positive effort toward assimilation on his part needed to be very slight, and in the small town, where he was not confined to an ethnic group, perhaps even resistance to assimilation would have been ineffective.

The settlement of the populations of Europe displaced by the war obviously cannot be accomplished on the American pattern, since, if for no other reason, the economic factors are so very different: Europe does not lack manpower but the wherewithal to feed it. The United States could, no doubt, support an immensely greater population, quickly recruited from Europe, but the admission of so many persons would require a complete re-orientation along both economic and political lines, domestic and foreign. There is small likelihood that this re-orientation will, or could, be undertaken. One consequence of increased European immigration, taken together with America's present international commitments and relatively uncontrolled economy, would be the need of drastically reducing wages. With American labour as an organised body the decisive factor in elections and with that body now in a position to demand the extreme limit of wages the present system can bear, no programme that would involve the sudden influx of much cheap labour is likely to be taken under consideration. (Various bills before Congress to admit strictly limited numbers of European D.P.'s of specified skills

have gotten nowhere.) The large-scale movements of peoples and the American small town were perhaps seen in their happiest forms in the 19th century; it would take someone more rash or more wise than the present writer to say what the future nature of each and the relations of both will be.

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CHINA'S POPULATION PROBLEMS

THE 'numbering' of people used to be resented in ancient times as presumptuous, unlucky and only meant as a means of further fiscal extortion. The taking of a census for purely scientific, demographic purposes is something quite modern and goes back to the 'counting of heads', required by democracy, practised for the first time in 1790 by the United States; Great Britain following suit with a first census in 1801. Subsequently most other countries have likewise introduced the system of a decennial census; but there are important exceptions still, the most serious one being that of China, which is quite innocent of any reliable nation-wide statistics of any sort.

To say anything about China's population one is therefore left to shrewd guesses, scientific approximations or a lively imagination. The Imperial Government ordered a census to be taken in 1895 and 1910, which yielded a total of 377 and 316 million inhabitants respectively. The Republic, if only on account of the endemic warfare which has bedevilled its existence from the very start, has had to content itself with 'Post Office Estimates', which in 1920 suggested 428 and in 1930 445 millions as China's total population. Finally in 1932 the Government came out with a fiat declaring 475 millions to be the right figure; against which W. F. Wilcox of the American Statistical Association in its *Journal* for 1930 maintained that 342 millions was the most he could concede.

C. P. Fitzgerald by a painstaking computation of cities actually occupied at different periods of Chinese history arrived at a grand total of 130 millions as China's population under the T'ang Dynasty in 618 A.D. (*China Journal* of 1932). His computation is made province by province and therefore enables one to see that the growth of population has been quite uneven. Whilst Kansu has remained stationary, Shansi and Shensi show an actual drop in population from 15 and 14 millions in 618 to 10 and 9 millions in 1910. On the other hand the southern provinces show a remarkable increase in popula-