

# An Immigration Country of Assimilative Pluralism

Immigrant Reception and Absorption in  
American History

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The *continuous* immigration of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was thus central to the whole American faith. It gave every old American a standard by which to judge how far he had come and every new American a realization of how far he might go. It reminded every American, old and new, that change is the essence of life, and that American society is a process, not a conclusion.

—John F. Kennedy, 1958

This was America. But America in the uniqueness of its extreme situation often foreshadowed the destiny of the whole western world of Europe.

—Oscar Handlin, 1956

Unlike the nation-states of Europe, the United States has historically been a country in which heterogeneity formed the basis of the state. While the history of European states centered on consolidating homogeneous ethnic nations, in the United States the state arose from a democratic-cosmopolitan nation shaped largely by immigration. Indeed, the United States is usually classified as the outstanding case of an “immigration country,” a state resting on a transplanted creole population of diverse and mixed ethnic ancestry.

The United States has qualified as world history's greatest immigration country by virtue of the quantity of immigrants it received and the number of ethnic groups it accommodated. A comparative accounting of U.S. immigration totals reveals the United States' historic role as a uniquely powerful magnet of international population movements. More immigrants went to the United States than to all other great immigration-receiving countries in the world combined. From 1820 to 1930, 38 million people moved to the United States, while 24 million migrated to Canada, Argentina, Brazil, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and other areas. From 1945 to the early 1990s, 20 million newcomers flocked to the United States (Bernard 1950, 201; U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1991, 48–50).

Immigration into the United States reflected an unparalleled historic pattern of ethnic variation. From 1820 to 1945, 16 percent of immigrants to the USA came from Germany, 12 percent from Italy, 12 percent from Ireland, 11 percent from Austria-Hungary, 9 percent from Russia, and 8 percent from Canada, while only 7 percent arrived from England. Smaller fractions of the influx came from Asia, the Middle East, the Caribbean, and Latin America. By contrast, other English-speaking immigration countries drew their settlers almost wholly from other English-speaking nations, and Latin American societies also showed a narrow spectrum of national diversity limited chiefly to Iberian and Italian origins (Bernard 1950, 204, 311)

### **The Regulation and Reception of Immigrants**

Legislation enacted by Congress both shaped and reflected the changing demographic patterns of U.S. immigration. Immigration policy was thus in a constant process of evolution, regulating immigration according not only to the shifting characteristics of immigrants but also to a changing vision of the agenda for national development.

In the century after the American Revolution, immigration policy was guided by the assumptions rooted in ideological republicanism. The U.S. polity embodied in its institutions and operating procedures the principle of political equality. This principle rested on a cosmopolitan faith in the capacity of all

men for rational self-rule (Wood 1969, chs. 1–2; Kettner 1974, 208–42). Moreover, the Revolution popularized a new conception of national identity. In their struggle to separate themselves from the English, Americans avowed that they were a new people bred from the frontier and the mingling of several nationalities. The official motto *E Pluribus Unum* expressed the new government's confidence in the unity that would arise from the diversity of the American people (Mann 1979, 52). In 1776 the pamphleteer Tom Paine declared "Europe and not England, is the parent country of America" (Paine 1776, 84).

A cosmopolitan outlook shaped the federal government's view of the immigrant's place in the new nation. In the Ordinance of 1785, Congress included a guarantee of religious freedom in the Northwest Territories, intending that this protection would act as a stimulus to immigration. At the Constitutional Convention of 1787, James Madison asserted, "That part of America which has encouraged them [the foreigners] most, has advanced most rapidly in population, agriculture, and the arts." In 1792 Alexander Hamilton, secretary of the treasury, noted in his Report on Manufactures that "a perfect equality of religious privileges will probably cause them [immigrants] to flock from Europe to the United States." Hamilton's understudy, Assistant Secretary of State Tench Coxe, publicized the number of religions followed in the United States and the religious freedom held out to all immigrants (Bernard 1980, 488).

During the first century of national government, Congress established the principle of admitting immigrants on the basis of individual qualification. Rights to naturalization were available to all free whites (*U.S. Statutes at large* 1 [1790]:103). The principle of citizenship by territorial birthright, the law of *jus soli*, ensured that the descendants of immigrants automatically became part of the political community (Schuck and Smith 1985, 52–53).

As a logical corollary to the axiomatic concept of individual citizenship, rights to admission and settlement could not be apportioned according to group origin. Lawmakers consistently refused to support colonization projects aimed at building immigrant communities seeking to retain separate and distinct cultures. For example, in 1817 Congress refused a petition from the Irish Emigrant Society of New York to reserve public lands

in Illinois for exclusive settlement by Irish newcomers (Jones 1960, 119). In 1874 Congress received a petition from German Mennonite immigrants for special and exclusive settlement rights. Some federal lawmakers were tempted to give them their own tract of land to keep them from going to Canada. Others took the traditional position that no group had "a separate right to compact themselves as an exclusive community." The controversy ended when three western states offered the Mennonites exemption from militia duty, thus leading most of them to settle in the United States (Higham 1955, 17).

The Republican Party supported an open immigration policy in its presidential and local campaigns. Its 1864 platform, which Abraham Lincoln helped write, announced, "Foreign immigration which in the past has added so much to the wealth, resources, and increase of power to this nation—the asylum of all oppressed nations—should be fostered and encouraged by a liberal and just policy." In 1868 and 1872 the party renewed its promises to use federal power to stimulate immigration (Bernard 1980, 489).

In 1875 a U.S. Supreme Court decision started a tidal change in national immigration policy. In *Henderson v. Mayor of New York*, the court declared unconstitutional all the seaboard states' existing laws controlling the reception of immigrants, having found that they usurped the exclusive power vested in Congress to regulate foreign commerce. The operation of state immigration commissions and port authorities was suddenly declared legally invalid. Soon thereafter, Congress plunged into new legislative activity that produced a series of statutes bringing immigration under direct federal regulation for the first time. The era of decentralized administration of immigration had come to an end (*Reports of the Immigration Commission* 1911, vol. 39).

In the 1870s pressures were building to regulate immigration by using nationality to determine admissions. Labor organizations appealed to Congress to curtail the immigration of Chinese workers, and both the Republican and Democratic parties of the Far Western states agreed that Congress must take regulatory action against the Chinese. Chinese immigration, however, had been approved by the Burlingame Treaty of 1868 (16 Stat. 739:1868): in exchange for trading privileges, it promised China that the free immigration of Chinese to the United States would

continue. Thus when Congress passed a bill in 1879 that attempted to restrict Chinese immigration by banning from entry all vessels carrying more than fifteen Chinese passengers, President Rutherford B. Hayes vetoed the bill, claiming that it violated the Burlingame Treaty. A new treaty was negotiated with China in 1880 that permitted the United States to "regulate, limit, or suspend" but "not absolutely prohibit" the migration of Chinese laborers. Finally, in 1882 Congress enacted the Chinese Exclusion Act banning all Chinese laborers and preventing Chinese immigrants from acquiring U.S. citizenship through naturalization (22 Stat. 58:1882).

From 1891 to 1929 Congress built a complex body of law that steadily restricted the categories of immigrants qualified for admission. Its goal was to admit only those who theoretically could be assimilated into the host society. Piece by piece, it enacted measures that set more stringent requirements for immigrants and enlarged the number of excluded categories. In 1891 Congress excluded from admission people likely to become public charges, people with certain contagious diseases, and those convicted of crimes, and polygamists (26 Stat. 1084:1891). The assassination of President William McKinley in 1901 prompted Congress in 1903 to bar anarchists and other subversives from entry (32 Stat. 1213:1903). A 1907 law excluded people with mental defects and those who had committed crimes involving "moral turpitude" (34 Stat. 898:1907).

The restrictions limiting Asian immigration intensified through new legislation. Since the 1870s congressmen and senators from the Far Western states had made the permanent exclusion of Chinese laborers a paramount legislative goal. In 1902 they succeeded in passing a law that indefinitely prohibited the immigration of Chinese workers (32 Stat. 176:1902). About this time, however, new immigrants from Asia, the Japanese, began to arrive in numbers as great as those during the peak years of Chinese immigration. Congress proposed to extend the ban on Chinese immigrants to include the Japanese. Lawmakers also sought to exclude Korean immigrants, whose homeland had been annexed by Japan in 1905. Anti-Asian restrictionism received an unexpected boost in 1907 and 1908 when the so-called Gentleman's Agreement was arranged between Washington and Tokyo (Hing 1993, 207–12): the Japanese government

pledged to restrict emigration of Japanese laborers to the United States in exchange for the admission of Japanese-American pupils to San Francisco's public school system.

The Immigration Act of 1917 was a major step toward an omnibus policy of discriminatory restriction based on national origins (39 Stat. 874:1917). It introduced the long-sought literacy test, which its supporters believed would have the practical effect of excluding immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. It established an Asiatic Barred Zone, from which no laborers could come, covering all of India, Afghanistan, and Arabia as well as East Asia and the Pacific. This controversial law was passed over the veto of Woodrow Wilson.

After a slowdown in arrivals, mainly resulting from the international disruptions of World War I, annual immigration rebounded. Restrictionists groped for more drastic devices to stem the flood (Higham 1955, 308). In 1921 legislators introduced a system of discriminatory quotas (42 Stat. 5:1921). Using the Dillingham Immigration Commission findings as evidence, Congress began to devise a ranking system by which groups of particular national origins were preferred over others (Handlin 1957, 77–110). This innovation constituted a turning point in the history of U.S. immigration policy. Henceforth, the number of aliens of any admissible nationality would equal 3 percent of the foreign-born population of that nationality enumerated in the United States census of 1910. These quotas were limited to Europe, the Near East, Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and Siberia. They did not apply to nationalities excluded previously by the Asiatic Barred Zone, Chinese exclusion laws, and the Gentleman's Agreement. They also did not extend to countries in the Western Hemisphere. Finally, the 1921 act installed for the first time an annual ceiling on admissions of 355,000, 200,000 of which were available to immigrants from northern and western Europe and 155,000 going chiefly to those from southern and eastern Europe. This act was passed over yet another veto by Woodrow Wilson.

Spearheaded by delegations from western and southern states, Congress passed the Johnson-Reid Act of 1924 (43 Stat. 153:1924). It barred all Asian immigrants as "aliens ineligible for citizenship" and imposed even smaller quotas on southern and eastern Europe. The annual ceiling on total immigration

was set at 2 percent of the foreign-born population in the United States in 1890. The 1890 baseline for quotas favored immigrants from northern and western Europe, since they were more heavily represented in 1890 than in 1910. Resetting the quotas reduced the southern and Eastern European share of annual admissions to only 20 percent.

Restrictionists used the Johnson-Reid Act as a temporary measure before an even more severe restrictive policy was installed in 1929. The annual ceiling for immigration shrank once more, to 150,000. A formal "national origins" plan was invoked in which quotas were allocated to countries on the basis of the proportion of ancestry groups in the U.S. population as enumerated by the 1920 census (Divine 1957, 27–50). Northern and Western European countries received 82 percent of the annual ceiling. Those in southern and eastern Europe received 16 percent, and the rest of the world 2 percent. The national origins system thus met the desired goal of distributing quotas according to a hierarchy of nationalities ranked in grades of assimilability.

In the industrial era, a trans-Atlantic population movement had dominantly shaped the patterns of immigration. Immigration from Asia accounted for only a small percentage of total immigration from 1850 to 1910; mass immigration from Mexico and the Caribbean only began just prior to World War I. The bulk of immigration came from Europe and evolved through two distinct ethnically defined stages. In the first period, from the end of the Napoleonic Wars to the 1870s, immigration from North and West European nations predominated, particularly from Ireland and Germany. Two million Irish immigrants and 1.5 million German immigrants arrived in the three decades before the Civil War (U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service 1991, 48; Anbinder 1992, 4). They constituted two-thirds of all immigrants who arrived from 1830 to 1860. After 1890 U.S. immigration was fed increasingly by streams originating from southern and eastern Europe. The largest groups among the so-called new immigrants came chiefly from Italy, Austria-Hungary, and Russia (Archdeacon 1983, 121–28). From 1899 to 1924 3.8 million Italians immigrated, 80 percent of them from southern Italy. The peak of Italian immigration to the United States occurred between 1900 and 1914: 3 million Italians arrived during this period. The Slavs formed the second largest group in the new

immigration: 3.4 million entered from 1899 to 1924. From 1899 to 1924, among the eastern Slavs, Russians, Ruthenians, and Ukrainians were the most numerous. Among the western Slavs, Poles, Czechs, and Slovaks made up the largest number. And among the southern Slavs, Slovenians and Croatians predominated. Jews from eastern Europe constituted the third major element of the new immigration, accounting for 1.8 million arrivals from 1899 to 1924. Three-quarters of Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe in the United States came from Russian territory. One-quarter came from Romania and the Hapsburg Empire of Austria-Hungary (Galicia, Bukovina, and Hungary). Other groups contributed smaller but substantial numbers. Five hundred thousand Greeks, 500,000 Hungarians, and 300,000 Finns entered the United States from 1899 to 1924. This tremendous flow from southern and eastern Europe was drastically reduced by the imposition of restrictive immigration quotas in 1924.

From the end of the Napoleonic era to the onset of the Great Depression, U.S. immigration developed consistent and distinct demographic features. The annual influx displayed a steady upward trend until the ending of free immigration from Europe but embedded in this trend were short swings of ebb and flow coincident with the economic cycle of growth and recession. The composite demographic pattern stemmed from the predominance of young males, the proletarian character of the labor force, the rising level of return migration, and the growth of immigration from outside northern and western Europe, especially from Asia and southern and eastern Europe (Ueda 1994, 11–15).

In the years between the world wars, lawmakers tended to treat immigration from the Western Hemisphere as a special case apart from all other foreign influxes. Immigration from Canada and Latin America was exempted from nationality quotas and yearly admissions ceilings. Seeking to satisfy agricultural and industrial employers in the Southwest, Congress kept a back door open to cheap labor from Mexico. Congress also introduced a guest-worker program with Mexico in which 4.7 million braceros, or agricultural laborers, were admitted on temporary work contracts from 1943 to 1965 (Fuchs 1990, 120–27).

From World War II to the Vietnam War, the United States gradually overhauled its immigration policy. The dismantling of restrictionist quotas sprang from the new global role for the

United States that had begun with its involvement in World War II. Strengthening the image of the United States as a world democratic leader necessitated recasting immigration policy to reflect the nation's dedication to fair treatment of all nationalities. The postwar reform of admissions and naturalization policy was perhaps the most consequential governmental action furthering the conception of the United States as a world melting pot based on inclusive and unified citizenship. Immigration law came to reflect better than any other body of public policy the view that racial and ethnic distinctions were invalid.

Coupling the historic ideal of immigrant nationhood to the realpolitik of cold war diplomacy, a bill admitting "Displaced Persons," or refugees, from central and eastern Europe passed into law in 1948 (62 Stat. 1009:1948). Later in the decade Congress legislated acts that brought refugees from other places in Europe as well as Asia. Refugees gained admission far in excess of the quota allotments for their home countries, and the United States became the world's leader in refugee admissions. One out of seven immigrants arriving from World War II to 1990—2.5 million immigrants out of a total of 18.6 million—were refugees (Ueda 1994, 50).

The first fault line in the fortress of restriction occurred in 1943, when Congress repealed the Chinese exclusion policy, in force since 1882 (57 Stat. 600:1943). In 1946 Congress permitted the naturalization of immigrants from India and the Philippines and provided a token quota to India (60 Stat. 416:1946). Exclusions according to national origins was no longer an absolute interest of the United States. The 1952 McCarran-Walter Immigration Act reaffirmed the discriminatory quota system but loosened exclusion slightly by setting up small token quotas for immigrants from Asian countries, who had been barred since 1924. All racial prohibitions on naturalization were rescinded. By abolishing Asian exclusion, the McCarran-Walter Act eliminated a principal obstacle to reopening admissions on a worldwide basis.

With the passage of the Hart-Celler immigration act of 1965, the national-origins system of restrictive admissions and exclusion was replaced by a worldwide system of equal per-country visa allotments (79 Stat. 911:1965). Ethnic variation in U.S. immigration increased in unexpected ways. Immigration accelerated from regions in Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, the

Middle East, and Africa, from which few immigrants had previously come. The yearly arrivals of European immigrants shrank to a small fraction by the 1980s. The Immigration and Naturalization Service reported admissions in 1990 from thirty Asian countries (including the Middle East), seventeen Central and South American countries, thirteen Caribbean countries, and thirteen African countries (U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service 1991, 52–53).

In the 1970s and 1980s the reform of immigration policy continued to be shaped by congressional and presidential efforts to further U.S. globalism aims during the cold war, but these had the overall effect of expanding opportunities for admission. Special preference categories for family reunification and highly trained personnel enlarged the flow (Fuchs 1990, 279). The United States continued its world leadership in refugee admissions with the passage of the Refugee Act of 1980, which established a permanent mechanism for the admission of refugees (94 Stat. 102:1980). The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 normalized the status of undocumented and illegal immigrants and expanded certain categories of admission (100 Stat. 3349:1986). In 1990 Congress passed another major immigration bill that renewed the worldwide system of regular and refugee admissions (104 Stat. 4978:1990).

The pace of immigration legislation accelerated from 1965, promoting a steady rise in the annual totals of arrivals. The absence of a popular or intellectually potent ideology of restriction combined with the political effectiveness of pro-immigration advocates to produce an admissions policy in which the “values of expansion and diversity prevailed over those of restriction and homogeneity,” in the words of legal scholar Peter Schuck (1992, 37–92; see also Loescher and Scanlon 1986). By the mid-1990s, however, faced with rising concerns over the problems of absorbing the mounting foreign population, legislators began to consider new ways to downsize the flow of immigrants.

### **The Historic Factors Promoting Assimilative Pluralism**

The juxtaposition of the enormous pluralism of immigration and widespread ethnic assimilation came to define the social dynam-

ics of the United States in a cardinal way. It resulted from a democratic response to the challenge of multicultural pluralism early in its history that other nations in the old world such as Germany, France, England, and Japan are only facing today. The double position of the United States as the first immigration country in the modern world and the first pluralist democracy made a crucial historical difference in its national development relative to other societies.

After World War II, Germany and other western European societies experimented with ways to become immigration-receiving countries after having built advanced industrial economies in the framework of ethnic nationalism. With strong centralized states, these countries tried a managed approach to immigration. They assumed that government planning and control would handle the needs of immigrants and their impact on the host society. This managed influx was inserted into limited and specific slots in a highly evolved and articulated economy.

In the United States, by contrast, immigration preceded the founding of a national and industrial society. A self-concept emphasizing heterogeneity, not homogeneity, was already expressed in the cosmopolitan citizenship and nationality policies of the early republic. This idea overshadowed the self-image of national homogeneity (Fischer 1989, 595–603, 783–816; McDonald and McDonald 1980, 179–99; Handlin 1963, 149; Handlin and Handlin 1989, 139–40; Crevecoeur 1981, 69–70; Paine 1986, 85; Handlin and Handlin 1992, 85; Fuchs 1990, 16–19).

U.S. immigrants pioneered a creative form of a pluralism that can be described as consensual, voluntary, and democratic. The expansive economy, the process of urban growth, the fluid social structure, and the continuously expanding cultural pluralism produced by mass immigration provided a setting in which ethnic Americans could find niches for self-assertion and acculturation. They utilized the degrees of freedom afforded in the United States to merge with the wider community while maintaining connections with the sphere of ethnic life. Their adaptive strategy was sufficiently flexible and fluid to accommodate successive and superimposed waves of newcomers from changing home societies. The building of relations between immigrants and the host society involved communicating and coexisting with a vast array of different neighbors. Immigrants charted a variety of

ways to deal with the concurrent needs of joining the mainstream and maintaining their ethnic lives (Zunz 1982, 91–195; Cohen 1990, chs. 1–2; Bodnar 1985, chs. 4–6). Further adjustments in the community's institutional life and outreach occurred as second- and third-generation descendants achieved social mobility, resettled in suburban enclaves, and intermarried (Lieberson and Waters 1988; Alba 1990). Immigrants exhibited a dual capacity for repeated self-transformation and reconnection with their unique heritages. Ethnic relations in the United States can be compared to a kaleidoscope of old fragments resetting themselves into new and unpredictable patterns, the experiences of each immigrant group being the expressions of the U.S. pattern of ethnicity, endlessly renewing itself, endlessly reshaping national life (Fuchs 1990).

The societal problem presented by immigration lay in relating the parts to the whole, the ethnic fragments to the nation. For the custodians of the whole—the native legislators, opinion makers, and educators—the key question was whether national citizenship could unite the multitudinous subgroups settling in the country. The nation-building role of citizenship assumed paramount importance in the quintessential immigration country that was the USA (Marshall 1950; Bendix 1977).

The cosmopolitan and individualistic principles of U.S. constitutionalism possessed a potential for overcoming race and other accidental collective factors. The republican conception of U.S. citizenship applied without exception to all individuals of European origin. Although the Constitution remained ambivalent about race, it provided for the possibility of citizenship of freed African slaves and their descendants in the northern states. After the Civil War, the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments expanded the compass of U.S. citizenship to include emancipated blacks. In the twentieth century, the passage of laws creating a worldwide system of admissions and naturalization and the antidiscrimination policies springing from the Civil Rights movement made the United States a country in which citizenship and nationality were equivalent: all citizens were members of the nation and all members of the nation were equal citizens. This development was crucial for the incorporation of the wave of non-European immigrants arriving after the 1960s (Wood 1969, 606–15; Horowitz 1992, 12).

The idea of liberal nationalism institutionalized by the American Revolution was the most powerful shaping force of U.S. nationhood (Hobsbawm 1990, 39–40). Its idealistic universalism and individualism expressed through a nationalizing mission of outward movement through an open society toward a greater and higher community evoked a glorious destiny. In the United States, this destiny was promoted in the nineteenth century by expansionists who asserted that Americans conquered by absorption. The self-serving ideology of Manifest Destiny possessed at its core a vision of “elevating” the “misgoverned and oppressed.” Those claiming that the United States was “destined to expand by assimilating” backed up their words with the offer of citizenship to foreigners (Mann 1979, 127).

The valorizing of a civic self-identity beyond ethnic origin merged groups with the state and the nation. Immigrant outsiders found this viewpoint compelling and attractive because it supplied a democratic incentive to identify with a centralized political authority that protected the rights of all (Gellner 1983, 2). Liberal nationalism represented the interests of minorities, who came to claim its principles as part of their own essence. The historian Hans Kohn explained: “The American nation was to be a universal nation—not only in the sense that the idea which it pursued was believed to be universal and valid for the whole of mankind but also in the sense that it was a nation composed of many strains. Such a nation, held together by liberty and diversity, had to be firmly integrated around allegiance to the American idea, an idea to which everyone could be assimilated for the very reason that it was a universal idea” (1957, 138).

The principles of liberal nationalism meant that the collective concept of immigrant nationhood would centrally shape the idea of U.S. nationhood. Advocates of liberal nationalism promoted the right of immigrants to assimilate under an inclusive and unifying civic Anglo-Saxonism. Those espousing this integrationist nationalism believed that the transference of both culture and its proprietary possession could effectively occur (Kohn 1957, 150; Solomon 1956, 3–6; Mann 1979, 127–128; Arieli 1964, 87–89).

The republican and liberal framework of the national founding established a generous, protected sphere for the institutions of civil society and individual civil rights. The development of colonies far removed from close imperial supervision favored the



power of local community and individuals. The political charters drafted by anti-imperialist rebels limited the reach of government power. The federal and state constitutions gave the sphere of civil society a wide latitude to accommodate a social order of fluidity, pluralism, and voluntary integration. As the historian Yehoshua Arieli pointed out, "In the last analysis, American nationality was based on identification with a 'social system' and its political superstructure" that allowed "the local structure of social life" to be "woven into this texture of nationality" (1964, 77, see also 85–86; see Lipset 1963, chs. 2, 3; Greenfeld 1992, 420–22, 482–83; Handlin and Handlin 1961, 32–48; Glazer 1975, 26–27; Higham 1975, 18–20; Pocock 1975, 523).

The founders' purpose of curtailing centralized power produced a federal structure of government that deeply affected U.S. ethnic relations. Political federalism permitted the unregulated expression of ethnic pluralism. Ethnic groups had opportunities to fashion control over a variety of territorial subcommunities. The political scientist Lawrence H. Fuchs described what he termed the "civic culture" in this sphere: "The civic culture, with its principles of separation of church and state and the right of free speech and assembly, facilitated and protected the expression of ancestral cultural values and sensibilities and, in so doing, sanctioned the system of voluntary pluralism by which ethnic groups could mobilize their economic and political interests" (1990, 23). The pursuit of group interests and recognition could occur through local and regional impulses toward power. The decentralization of ethnic politics provided sufficient openings for the various assertions of communal self-determination. It was a safety valve for ethnic rivalries and tensions that diverted group conflicts from dominating national governance (Horowitz 1992, 23–25; Glazer 1983, 274–92).

The constitutions of the Revolutionary era did not give political status to ethnic groups or collective cultures. Federal and state constitutions only covered citizens; the U.S. polity merely tolerated the development of ethnic subcultures and institutions based on a variety of religions. Government policy toward ethnic subcultures therefore closely paralleled the principle of religious disestablishment. State officials did not sponsor the establishment of religious institutions, ethnic newspapers, language schools, and ethnic mutual aid societies. Government's avoid-

ance of involvement in communal life further encouraged immigrants to initiate and take responsibility for communal institutional affairs (Rahe 1994, 3:214–16; Jones 1960, 123; Higham 1955, 17; Correll 1946, 183–216).

Ethnic relations for immigrant groups in the United States developed along a course divergent from that in France and opposite from that in Germany. In the area between nationhood and ethnic groups established by a pluralist democracy, immigrants and their descendants possessed the right to assimilate *and* the right to preserve ethnic qualities. It was possible to become an ethnic U.S. citizen—to be Italian American or Japanese American—rather than to become French through cultural assimilation or to be German through ethnic descent. As Liah Greenfeld put the matter, "Dual identity thus remained typical," and as national integration proceeded, persons with parochial loyalties "were replaced by hyphenated Americans" (Greenfeld 1992, 482; see Horowitz 1992, 12–13; Brubaker 1992, 97–98).

Permeable boundaries between a multiplicity of immigrant groups came to define the character of ethnic relations. Because immigrants exercised extensive self-determination and self-maintenance in their cultural and social existence, ethnic identity and national identity coexisted in a kind of deregulated balance. A pluralism based on consent—the individual's elective option to change or preserve traditions and to create new attachments for collective identity—made possible a pluralism that was assimilative. Immigrant ethnic groups never became isolated, and national life depended on openness toward them. Even the Anglo-Saxon core became porous; the charter group could not preserve a totally separate sphere of existence. As a consequence of these transactional processes, immigrant groupings evolved from an initial phase of differentiation to accommodation, integration, and finally consolidation in the patterns of national life.

The effectiveness of its assimilative ethnic pluralism set the United States apart from traditional plural societies such as India, Austria-Hungary, the Russian Empire, and the Ottoman Empire. Immigration was the principal shaping force of this absorptive factor. Immigration ensured that the patterns of pluralism would not become preformed and predetermined. Rather than becoming petrified cultural roots, they unfolded progres-



sively as living and creative forms capable of absorbing new traditions. Impinging recurrently on the rebuilding of a society and its institutions, the periodic cycles of immigration constituted a dynamic force that endowed the United States with an undelimited capacity for social transformation, making it "a permanently unfinished country." Because the ever-changing patterns of pluralism exercised an assimilative power, the United States, the immigration country par excellence, sustained itself as a unified democracy in the twentieth century (Higham 1975, 18–20; Glazer 1975, 26–27; Franklin, Pettigrew, and Mack 1971, 34).

These open patterns of cultural and social pluralism did not exist full-blown and continuously through the span of national history. They were historically constructed, evolving gradually in a matrix of political and civic conditions that grew more racially inclusive over time.

### German Immigrants as a Case Study in Assimilative Pluralism

The involvement of immigrant groups in the patterns of assimilative pluralism followed a rough sequence corresponding to time of arrival. The group life of immigrants from northern and western Europe who composed the earliest influx was incorporated within the dynamics of an assimilative pluralism in the earliest and most developed way. The history of the ethnic community arising out of German immigration provides a revealing illustration of this process.

More immigrants to the United States came from Germany than from any other country. During the eighteenth century at least 65,000 and perhaps as many as 100,000 immigrants arrived, chiefly from the Rhenish Palatinate (Conzen 1980, 407). The large majority were Protestant sectarians. This flow to North America was newer and smaller than the historic and massive migration of Catholic Germans eastward into Hapsburg lands and Russia. In the 1830s, however, trans-Atlantic migration for the first time surpassed the continental flow to the east (Bade 1995, 400). The United States became the principal destination. From 1820 to 1990 7 million immigrants arrived from Germany, constituting 15 percent of the total of all immigrants

to the United States. Protestants made up over half of all German immigrants, while Catholics composed a third, and Jews the remainder (Conzen 1980, 417).

The period from 1840 to 1890 constituted the high tide of German immigration. Over these five decades, 4.5 million German immigrants arrived (U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service 1990, table 2). In the 1880s, the peak historical decade of immigration from Germany, 1.4 million German newcomers came to the United States.

As the largest immigrant ethnic population in the era of the agricultural and industrial revolutions, German Americans shaped the growth of the nineteenth-century economy, perhaps more broadly than any other immigrant group. They played a central role in the expansion of craftsmanship and the commercialization of family farming. In 1870 37 percent of employed German immigrants held skilled occupations, 27 percent were farmers, 23 percent worked in professional and service fields, and 13 percent in trade and transportation (Conzen 1980, 413). German immigrants predominated in these fields, particularly in the upper Mississippi and Ohio River valleys, where half of all German-born people in the United States lived (Sowell 1996, 72).

Germans made up the largest ethnic element among all U.S. farmers. In 1870 one out of three foreign-born farmers was a German immigrant (Conzen 1980, 415). By 1900 they owned 11 percent of all U.S. farms. In 1880 German farmers in eastern Texas outproduced other Texan farmers (Sowell 1996, 72). In the 1930s Germans owned most of the sugar beet farms in Colorado, Montana, and Wyoming.

The German presence in industry and artisanship was equally important. German immigrants were numerous in the ranks of skilled urban workingmen. In nineteenth-century Milwaukee, St. Louis, New York City, Detroit, and Boston, Germans made up a large share of the so-called labor aristocracy. German skilled workers specialized in cabinetmaking, tailoring, and cigar making and dominated many food-preparation fields, such as butchering, baking, brewing, and distilling.

Among first- and second-generation Germans there were also many educators, church leaders, engineers, academics, physicians, lawyers, and other professionals. German Americans

diversified the occupational spectrum and galvanized the patterns of social mobility in immigrant America.

Successful economic adaptation was coupled with a vigorous ethnic communal life. German farmers and artisans lived in enclaves that reflected the particular subregions of Germany from which they sprang. Local communal networks formed the basis of many small-scale enterprises. The historian Olivier Zunz found in his study of industrializing Detroit among “skilled and unskilled workers, the Germans were the most likely to be employed within their own community”: “They occupied every variety of skilled position, many working for large industrial concerns but as many being independent craftsmen, often employing a few men of their own. The Bureau of Labor’s factory inspection reports are filled with these small east-side shops run by Germans—the small hat factory with five workers, or the local newspaper with a work force of four, or the small bookbindery, or the jewelry or fabric store, or the small cigar factory” (1982, 224.) In the words of historian Kathleen Neils Conzen, the urban concentrations of Germans created “virtually self-sufficient neighborhood communities based on shared activities, voluntary associations, and formal institutions” (1980, 415). A report to the U.S. Office of Education described the German communities of South Dakota: “Some counties—Hutchinson, for example—are largely peopled by German stock. In this county and in Hanson County the German-Russian Mennonites still live the quaint community life brought with them from Russia. German, not English, is the language of the villages, although in most of the schools English is the language of instruction” (Thompson 1920, 147). Rural midwestern communities like Schleswig, Iowa, comprised nearly homogeneous clusterings of Germans who had emigrated from particular localities. The ethnic community and its families served as the social basis for the aggregate development of farmlands.

Whether rural or urban, the residential clusters of Germans exhibited a vigorous spirit of ethnocultural maintenance. In this respect, German-American communities epitomized the pattern of democratic consensual pluralism in the United States. They took advantage of the freedom offered by the large sphere of civil society to cultivate their own civic and cultural institutions. Germans established an innumerable variety of associational

clubs (Conzen 1976, ch. 6), including volunteer fire and militia companies, music societies, mutual-benefit lodges, recreational clubs, and dramatic societies. A national roster compiled in 1915 listed four cities with more than two hundred German-American clubs (416–17). Germans established churches wherever they settled. German Catholics used the church as a base for parochial schools that taught religious values and the German language. The Central Verein represented German Catholics nationally in the politics and management of social reform (Gleason 1968). On the basis of these associational patterns, the political scientist Lawrence H. Fuchs argued, “German immigrants and their children, more than any other group, provided a large-scale early example of the process of ethnic-Americanization, in which ancestral loyalties (religious, linguistic, and cultural) are changed (and in some ways strengthened) to American circumstances even as immigrants and their children embrace American political ideals and participate in American political institutions” (1990, 20).

The historian Frederick C. Luebke pointed out that “the German language became the chief agent for the perpetuation of immigrant cultural forms” (1990, 171). This was especially true after the 1890s, when the flow of immigrants who reinforced the ancestral culture underwent sharp decline. Germans continued to use German as the chief public language of their enclaves even into the twentieth century. It was the spoken language on many streets in Cincinnati, St. Louis, and Milwaukee. German Americans created and supported the largest foreign language press in the country. A survey by a Chicago sociologist, Robert E. Park, showed that in 1884 out of 794 foreign-language newspapers, 621 were in German (Tsuchida 1989, 96). In 1892 the number of German-language newspapers reached an all-time high of 794.

The vibrancy of German-American ethnicity perhaps reached a pinnacle around the turn of the century, but the unexpected crises of World War I and cultural change from intergenerational succession then led to progressive assimilation. The anti-German atmosphere generated by the war placed intense public pressure on German Americans to renounce their cultural and linguistic traditions. The attack on the maintenance of the German language produced a dramatic erosion of the linguistic

basis of German institutions and communities. Many educational institutions in the enclave communities no longer afforded instruction of German or in German. From the peak of 794 in 1892, the number of German language newspapers in the country had shrunk to 276 by 1920 (Tsuchida 1989, 96).

As the number of German newspapers dwindled to 81 in 1940 and to 33 by 1960, they served as a barometer of the cultural assimilation of German Americans. The ebbing tide of mass migration, the restriction of immigration after the 1920s, the process of upward social mobility, the absorption into secular middle-class culture, the impact of two world wars that forced German Americans to “disidentify” with the homeland, the residential mobility that depleted enclaves, and, above all, the rising rate of intermarriage (67 percent of Americans in 1979 with a German ancestor claimed multiple ancestry) turned one of the most vigorous ethnic subcultures in the United States into a melting fragment increasingly indistinguishable in the mainstream (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1982, 7). From this perspective, the history of the Germans in the United States can be regarded as the classic case of an immigrant group being transformed under the conditions existing in a pluralistic democracy. Responding to the liberalizing forces of assimilative pluralism, German Americans demonstrated how it was possible to develop an extraordinary communal ethnicity for a sustained period and also how the inescapable changes brought by social mobility and acculturation prevented this ethnicity from being maintained indefinitely.

The generations of German Americans showed how an immigrant ethnic group could leave their imprint on national life and national culture. Old universals disintegrated as they encountered new particularisms introduced through the transplantation of German culture. Over the course of two or three generations, however, the latter were reformatted into new inclusive totalities that stood for wider patterns. The economist Thomas Sowell explained this general process by describing how it worked to nationalize elements of German American subculture:

Over the years, Germans have made major contributions to many aspects of American society. In addition to the contributions of broad masses of German people in agriculture and industry, and of German food, customs, and attitudes toward recreation, numerous individuals of German ancestry made historic contributions in various

fields . . . . Firms established by individuals of German ancestry have been among the leaders in many American industries, including optics (Bausch and Lomb), wood products (Weyerhaeuser), automobiles (Chrysler), pianos (Steinway, Schnabel), organs (Wurlitzer), candy (Hershey), prepared food (Heinz), language instruction (Berlitz), and innumerable beer companies, including Anheuser-Busch, Miller, Coors, Pabst, Schlitz, and Blatz. Germans are no longer a distinctive group in America because they have become so much a part of American society and that society has absorbed so many German cultural features, from kindergartens to Christmas trees to coleslaw. With the passing generations, as the German language slowly faded away, many of the cultural features of German-American life became features of American life in general. (Sowell 1996, 82; see Sowell 1981, 58).

The history of German Americans exemplified the permeability of the national culture to introduced ethnic elements and the way it produced a self-recreating national culture. In the 1880s the frankfurter was seen as an ethnic food novelty in areas with large German settlements. A century later, in the 1980s, with the melting away of German ethnic communities, it was seen as the symbol of all-American food to be contrasted with “real” ethnic food. At a 1989 Fourth of July celebration in the multiracial suburb of Monterey Park, California, a Chinese girl hawked hot dogs, shouting, “Get your hot dogs here, they’re so American,” while a rival male vendor replied, “No, hot dogs are an American cliché. Expand your cultural experiences. Eat an egg roll” (Horton 1992, 240). The subtle reshaping of the national culture by German Americans—or for that matter, by any other immigrant population whose culture has passed into wider circles beyond the ethnic enclave—could easily escape notice, as this amusing anecdote illustrates. Perhaps this trivial incident was actually a significant expression of the efficacy of the historic patterns of assimilative pluralism in the United States (Brown and Bass 1985, 449; Horton 1992, 240).

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