

Liberty, Coercion, and the Making of Americans

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In 1782 a French immigrant, Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, published *Letters from an American Farmer*, one of the most influential meditations on what it means to become an American. In his letters, Crèvecoeur portrayed America as a magical place free of the encrusted beliefs, customs, and traditions that had disfigured European society. Here a new race of men had emerged. In a famous passage, Crèvecoeur wrote:

What then is the American, this new man? . . . *He* is an American who, leaving behind him all ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the 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.¹

Crèvecoeur's account of "individuals of all nations" being forged "into a new race of men" has resonated with Americans ever since. John Quincy Adams declared in 1819 that immigrants "must cast off the European skin, never to resume it." Frederick Jackson Turner rhapsodized that "in the crucible of the frontier the immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race, English in neither nationality nor characteristics." Israel Zangwill, the Anglo-Jewish author of *The Melting-Pot* (1909), had his protagonist, David, exclaim: "America is God's Crucible, the great Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming! . . . Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians—into the Crucible with you all! God is making the American." And Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. has recently reprised Zangwill's theme in *The Disuniting of America*, his widely read polemic against multiculturalism. "Those intrepid Europeans," Schlesinger writes,

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¹ Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782; New York, 1912), 43.

who had torn up their roots to brave the wild Atlantic *wanted* to forget a horrid past and to embrace a hopeful future. They *expected* to become Americans. . . . They saw America as a transforming nation, banishing dismal memories and developing a unique national character based on common political ideals and shared experiences. The point of America was not to preserve old cultures, but to forge a new *American* culture.²

Schlesinger and his predecessors said little about what traditions, customs, and habits made up this new American culture.³ But they all shared a belief that immigrants eagerly became American, making themselves over into a new breed of people—liberty loving, fiercely independent and proud, and increasingly prosperous.

In this essay, I test the Crèvecoeurian myth of Americanization against the rich body of work produced by historians and other students of European immigration in the twentieth century. The myth consists of four distinct claims: first, that European immigrants wanted to shed their Old World ways and to become American; second, that Americanization was quick and easy because the immigrants found no significant obstacles thrown in their path; third, that Americanization “melted” the immigrants into a single race, culture, or nation, unvarying across space and time; and fourth, that immigrants experienced Americanization as emancipation from servitude, deference, poverty, and other Old World constraints.

I focus on literature generated since World War I on European immigration from 1880 to 1920, the era of the so-called new immigrants. Although this was one of two great waves of European immigration since independence, it was numerically the larger and, for scholarship, the more influential. In those years 23 million people came into a society that in 1900 numbered only 76 million. Most came from eastern and southern Europe. The arrival of these immigrants coincided with the emergence of American social science, which is one reason why that wave has preeminently shaped historical and sociological interpretations of the European immigrant experience.⁴

² For John Quincy Adams's statement, see Moses Rischin, ed., *Immigration and the American Tradition* (Indianapolis, 1976), 47. For Frederick Jackson Turner's statement, see Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York, 1986), 5. Israel Zangwill, *The Melting-Pot* (1909; New York, 1923), 33; Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York, 1992), 13.

³ By culture they usually meant the political culture defined by two American beliefs: that all human beings are created equal and possess inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness and that all governments are the creation and servants of the people and derive their legitimacy from the people's consent. Immigrants, in the eyes of Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. and other purveyors of the Crèvecoeur myth, embraced that political culture and became deeply attached to the American nation that espoused it. By stressing the political, Schlesinger and others implicitly emphasized the British contribution to this new culture, for eighteenth-century America was, in governance and political thought, profoundly British. Adherents of the Crèvecoeur school were not precise about how to reconcile such English roots with the emphasis on hybridity.

⁴ Leonard Dinnerstein, Roger L. Nichols, and David M. Reimers, *Natives and Strangers: Blacks, Indians, and Immigrants in America* (New York, 1990), 127; Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science* (New York, 1991). This essay focuses on works that have been influential in setting the scholarly agenda, whether general histories of immigration or monographs on particular groups. The essay does not survey the large, distinguished, and complex literatures devoted to the history of particular groups such as Germans, Jews, Italians, Poles, and Irish. For other recent historiographical efforts to grapple with issues of Americanization and assimilation, see Russell A. Kazal, “Revisiting Assimilation: The Rise, Fall, and Reappraisal of a Concept in American Ethnic History,” *American Historical Review*, 100 (April 1995), 437–71; Elliott A. Barkan, “Race, Religion, and Nationality in American Society: A Model of Ethnicity—From Contact to Assimilation,” *Journal of American Ethnic History*,¹⁴

The first part of this essay analyzes the long retreat from the Crèvecoeurian myth that began with Robert E. Park and the Chicago sociologists in the 1920s and accelerated during the 1940s and 1950s, when Oscar Handlin dominated the field of immigration history. Park challenged Crèvecoeur's second claim, that Americanization was quick and easy. Handlin undermined the third and fourth claims, arguing that all immigrants did not melt into a single pot and that Americanization was an alienating rather than an emancipatory experience. The "new historians of immigration," such as Frank Thistlewaite, Rudolph J. Vecoli, and Herbert G. Gutman, whose writings began to appear in the 1960s and early 1970s, are usually regarded as Handlin's opponents. But I argue that in some ways they were his allies, completing the demolition job on Crèvecoeur that Handlin had done much to advance. They joined Handlin in criticizing Americanization, labeling it exploitative rather than alienating. And they went a step beyond Handlin, challenging Crèvecoeur's first claim that the immigrants wanted to become American. To these new and radical historians, Americanization was a coercive process forced on the newcomers, who preferred maintaining their old cultures to becoming "new," exploited men.⁵

The second part of this essay analyzes scholars' resurgent interest in questions of Americanization, as they sought to explain what the radical perspective of the 1960s could not: that the European immigrants of the century's early years eventually became patriotic Americans. Some scholars, notably Lawrence H. Fuchs and Werner Sollors, resurrected a key element of the Crèvecoeurian myth by stressing the emancipatory impulse inherent in Americanization.⁶ Others remained closer in spirit to the 1960s radicals, emphasizing how class, gender, and race limited or

(Winter 1995), 38–75; Ewa Morawska, "In Defense of the Assimilation Model," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 13 (Winter 1994), 76–87; David L. Salvatore, "Becoming American: Assimilation, Pluralism, and Ethnic Identity," in *Immigrant America: European Ethnicity in the United States*, ed. Timothy Walsh (New York, 1994), 29–54; Olivier Zunz, "American History and the Changing Meaning of Assimilation," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 4 (Winter 1985), 53–72. See also the valuable essays by Rudolph J. Vecoli surveying the fields of immigration and ethnic history: Rudolph J. Vecoli, "The Resurgence of American Immigration History," *American Studies International*, 17 (Winter 1979), 46–66; Rudolph J. Vecoli, "Return to the Melting Pot: Ethnicity in the Eighties," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 5 (Fall 1985), 7–20; and *Encyclopedia of the United States in the Twentieth Century*, 1st ed., s.v. "Ethnicity and Immigration" by Rudolph J. Vecoli. My own education in these matters has benefited enormously from the work of John Higham and Philip Gleason. See, for example, John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860–1925* (1955; New Brunswick, 1992); John Higham, *Send These to Me: Jews and Other Immigrants to Urban America* (New York, 1975); *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, 1st ed., s.v. "American Identity and Americanization" by Philip Gleason; and Philip Gleason, *Speaking of Diversity: Language and Ethnicity in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore, 1992). Comprehensive histories of the American immigrant experience include Dinnerstein, Nichols, and Reimers, *Natives and Strangers*; Thomas J. Archdeacon, *Becoming American: An Ethnic History* (New York, 1983); and Roger Daniels, *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life* (New York, 1990).

⁵ See, for example, Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess, *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* (New York, 1922); Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations That Made the American People* (1951; Boston, 1973); Frank Thistlewaite, "Migration from Europe Overseas in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," in *A Century of European Migrations, 1830–1930*, ed. Rudolph J. Vecoli and Suzanne M. Sinke (Urbana, 1991), 17–49; Rudolph J. Vecoli, "Contadini in Chicago: A Critique of *The Uprooted*," *Journal of American History*, 51 (Dec. 1964), 404–17; and Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York, 1976), esp. 3–78.

⁶ Lawrence H. Fuchs, *The American Kaleidoscope: Race, Ethnicity, and the Civic Culture* (Hanover, 1990); Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity*.

eviscerated the emancipatory potential of Americanism. Both groups found a complexity in Americanization that earlier scholars had rarely discerned. They rejected the Crèvecoeurian notion that all immigrants were being melded into a single race or culture. In their accounts, immigrant individuals and groups voicing varying aspirations and needs were creating many Americanisms; some drew heavily on ethnic roots, others carved out utterly new American identities. Thus Americanization lost the clean linearity it had possessed in earlier accounts and became a chaotic, pluralistic site of postmodern invention.

The two post-1980s camps differed on the question of volition: Were individuals and groups free to fashion an American identity of their own choosing, or were they constrained by social structures and historical circumstances over which they had little control? The first camp, that of Fuchs and Sollors, argued that the United States was a genuinely plural society where different groups could construct virtually any desired identity. The second camp, which included Roy Rosenzweig, Irving Howe, Elizabeth Cohen, and Gwendolyn Mink, asserted that class and gender constrained the process of invention.⁷

My own work and sympathies lie with the latter group, and I attempt to explain why we have the better argument. I do this by examining not only the work outlined above but also newer scholarship on "whiteness" as a key component of American identity. The newer scholarship of David R. Roediger, Michael Rogin, and others treats race as more important than class or gender in the making of Americans, but its arguments have reinforced the emphasis of Rosenzweig, Mink, and others on the role of social forces external to the immigrant or ethnic group in determining the direction of Americanization.⁸

Among the critical responses to the newer historiography that are beginning to appear, the most interesting is David A. Hollinger's *Postethnic America*. Hollinger boldly sets forth a "Sollorsian" blueprint for the creation of a heterogeneous society in which individuals of all races will be free to choose whatever identities they wish to claim or create for themselves. Hollinger calls for the revival of a liberal nationalism that, through economic and cultural reform, will create an environment of racial equality in which a "postethnic" society can flourish.⁹ I counter that the nation is itself a structure of power that, like class, gender, and race, necessarily limits the array of identities available to Americans seeking diversity. And it is precisely the inattention to this and other structures of power that limits the work of Fuchs, Sollors, Hollinger, and others who, like Crèvecoeur, wish to view Americanization as emancipation. Any analysis of Americanization, past and present, must accord coercion a role in the making of Americans.

⁷ Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870–1920* (New York, 1983); Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made* (New York, 1976); Elizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (New York, 1990); Gwendolyn Mink, *The Wages of Motherhood: Inequality in the Welfare State, 1917–1942* (Ithaca, 1996).

⁸ See, for example, David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London, 1991); and Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley, 1996).

⁹ David A. Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York, 1995).



Coercive Americanization

The anti-German crusades of World War I turned the formerly respected Germans into brutes who destroyed civilization and violated womanhood. As a result, German Americans found their pluralist path of Americanization (becoming American while holding on to German culture) impossible to sustain. The nation as a structure of power had limited their choice of identity.

Reproduced from John M. Murrin, Paul E. Johnson, James M. McPherson, Gary Gerstle, Emily S. Rosenberg, and Norman L. Rosenberg, *Liberty, Equality, Power: A History of the American People*, 1st ed. (2 vols., Fort Worth, 1996), 741.

The Long Retreat from Crèvecoeur

Robert Park, William Isaac Thomas, Ernest W. Burgess, and others at the University of Chicago were the first scholars to examine systematically the relationship of the immigrant to American society. In works such as *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918–1920), they created a body of work that shaped historical and sociological studies of immigration for forty years. They disagreed with Crèvecoeur's view that immigrants quickly, enthusiastically, and effortlessly became Americans. Borrowing from the works of the German scholar Ferdinand Tönnies, especially from his seminal theory of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, the Chicago sociologists sketched out a far more painful and lengthy process of immigrants' disengagement from European roots and assimilation into American society.¹⁰

Industrialization, urbanization, and other modernizing forces, according to the Chicago sociologists, had disrupted the world of the European peasants, stripping their communities and families of resources, self-sufficiency, and stability and forcing them into far larger, more complex, and anomic social settings. The journey to America accelerated this modernizing process, as the rural traveler contended with not only cities and industry but also a profusion of ethnic and racial groups. Meeting peoples of other races and cultures made the immigrant conscious of his difference; soon he joined other immigrants who shared his language and culture to compete against other groups for jobs, housing, and political influence. These emergent ethnic groups replaced the shattered families and village institutions that had anchored European peasant communities, and they made possible the immigrants' adjustment to and absorption into American society.

Robert Park believed all immigrants underwent this "race relations cycle . . . of contacts, competition, accommodation, and eventual assimilation." Though the process was slow and difficult, it eventually erased ethnic and racial antagonisms and united all immigrants, minorities, and native-born Americans into a single national community. Park said little about the culture of this new national community, but he clearly regarded its emergence as emancipatory. His language gained uncharacteristic exuberance when he wrote about the melding of diverse peoples in America and elsewhere. A "cosmic process" of global industrialization, he claimed, had generated "a vast unconscious cooperation of races and peoples," making the modern era "the most romantic period in the history of the whole world." Mass communication had brought the peoples of the world closer together, ignited their hopes and dreams, and weakened the most encrusted ethnic and racial antagonisms. In these circumstances, Park declared, the race relations cycle had become "progressive and irreversible."¹¹

¹⁰ William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (2 vols., New York, 1918–1920); Robert E. Park and Herbert A. Miller, *Old World Traits Transplanted* (New York, 1921); Park and Burgess, *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*. On the Chicago School, see Fred H. Matthews, *Quest for an American Sociology: Robert E. Park and the Chicago School* (Montreal, 1977); Stow Persons, *Ethnic Studies at Chicago, 1905–1945* (Urbana, 1987); and Ross, *Origins of American Social Science*, 346–70.

¹¹ Robert E. Park, "Our Racial Frontier on the Pacific" (1926), in Robert E. Park, *Race and Culture* (Glencoe, 1950), 147–50.

In describing assimilation in such positive terms and in emphasizing its naturalness, Park unconsciously aligned himself with Crèvecoeur. In Park's view, the melting pot required no special tending by agents of either the state or private regulatory institutions. Just as Crèvecoeur believed, following Jean-Jacques Rousseau, that a natural society (such as the one forming in America) would surpass those deformed by castes, aristocracies, monarchies, and other artificial institutions, so Park argued that society advanced through "natural" social processes and did not respond well to political interventions.¹²

In advancing the claims of nature, Park was not simply continuing a line of thought that had been dominant since Crèvecoeur. He was reacting against an extraordinary effort on the part of American intellectuals and reformers to design an interventionist social science. Such social science would give government officials the knowledge and expertise to intercept social processes that had gone awry and to engineer more satisfactory outcomes. This effort is known to us as Progressivism, and from the perspective of immigrant assimilation, it had been a spectacular failure.

Confronting immigrants seemingly walled off in ghettos who spoke foreign languages, adhered to strange customs, suffered the effects of impoverishment, and appeared indifferent or antagonistic to the United States, Progressive reformers responded with Americanization campaigns on a scale not seen before. In schools, at workplaces, at settlement houses, and in politics, they taught immigrants English, the essentials of American citizenship, skills useful in getting decent employment, and faith in American values and institutions. The Progressives were a confident bunch, sure that their use of government and science would turn immigrants into Americans.¹³

In the emotionally charged atmosphere of World War I, however, the Progressive plan went off the tracks. War preparedness demanded a unified home front. The government endorsed the one-hundred-percent Americanism campaigns, initiated by private groups to suppress foreign cultural and political traditions that seemed to nurture antiwar or anti-American sentiments. These efforts gave rise to an ugly Americanism, intolerant of cultural and political difference and eager to deprive dissenters of their right to free speech. Many Progressives were complicit in these coercive efforts to strip immigrants of their foreign ways. After the war the simmering ethnic and racial antagonisms exploded. The vicious race riots of 1919, Prohibition, the Red Scare, the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, Congress's adoption

¹² Gary Gerstle, "The Protean Character of American Liberalism," *American Historical Review*, 99 (Oct. 1994), 1066-67. On the triumph of naturalism in American social science, see Ross, *Origins of American Social Science*, 303-470.

¹³ Although rightward-leaning Progressives insisted that immigrants conform to existing American values and left-leaning ones welcomed the infusion of immigrant traditions and values into American culture, through 1916, the two groups of Progressives cooperated. Gerstle, "Protean Character of American Liberalism." On Progressives' efforts at Americanization, see Higham, *Strangers in the Land*; Cecilia Elizabeth O'Leary, "Americans All? The Cultural Politics of American Patriotism, 1865-1918" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1995); Riva Lissak, *Pluralism and Progressives: Hull House and the New Immigrants, 1890-1919* (Chicago, 1989); John E. McClymer, "Gender and the American Way of Life: Women in the Americanization Movement," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 10 (Spring 1991), 3-20; and Robert A. Carlson, *The Quest for Conformity: Americanization through Education* (New York, 1975).

of a racist system of immigration restriction, and the imposition of Jewish quotas at elite private universities all revealed that a nasty and coercive Americanism had triumphed.¹⁴

Liberal social scientists recoiled from this Americanism, shocked that their earlier efforts to engineer assimilation had yielded reaction and intolerance. The confidence they had exhibited in the prewar years drained away, and many abandoned their formal efforts at Americanization and nation building. Too many immigrant cultures, they now believed, were resistant to assimilation; too many native-born Americans were incorrigibly intolerant. No magical fusing of the many ethnic and racial groups in the United States could occur, even with the aid of enlightened government policy and social science. The very word "Americanization" acquired such a bad, nativist odor that many liberal reformers and social scientists stopped using it altogether.¹⁵

Robert Park tried to evade the wreck of the liberal project by reasserting naturalist principles. No intervention could prevent economic and social processes from advancing assimilation. Many liberals privately shared his hope that the ethnic and racial differences that had produced such hatred and animosity would fade, and that immigrants would become American. But such liberals no longer felt the elation with which a Crèvecoeur or a Zangwill had expressed the vision of immigrants becoming new men. The intellectual retreat from the notion of Americanization as emancipation had begun.

Nowhere was this retreat more evident than in the work of Oscar Handlin, the most important immigrant historian of the mid-twentieth century and the scholar most responsible for establishing the legitimacy of immigration history. Born into a Jewish immigrant family in 1915, Handlin experienced the intolerant 1920s firsthand. At Harvard, where he began his graduate studies in the mid-1930s, he had to contend with the university's ingrained anti-Semitism. Although he triumphed over this adversity by becoming one of the history department's first Jewish professors and by presiding over the post-1940s transformation of Harvard into a philo-Semitic institution, he did not easily forget the sting of discrimination. This memory may help explain how and why he modified Robert Park's theories of assimilation.¹⁶

¹⁴ On anti-immigrant and antiradical activities, see Higham, *Strangers in the Land*. On antiblack sentiment, see William Tuttle, *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (New York, 1970).

¹⁵ Gerstle, "Protean Character of American Liberalism."

¹⁶ On anti-Semitism at Harvard University, see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York, 1988), 172-73. For a biographical sketch, see Maldwyn A. Jones, "Oscar Handlin," in *Pastmasters: Some Essays on American Historians*, ed. Marcus Cunliffe and Robin W. Winks (New York, 1969), 239-77. Marcus Lee Hansen is sometimes cited as a rival to Handlin in terms of influence on the field of immigration history, and his reputation is enjoying something of a revival. But he died in 1938 at the young age of forty-five, and over the following thirty years, his work generated far less interest and attracted far fewer disciples than did Handlin's. Marcus Lee Hansen, *The Immigrant in American History*, ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger (Cambridge, Mass., 1940); Marcus Lee Hansen, *The Atlantic Migration, 1607-1860: A History of Continuing Settlement of the United States*, ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger (Cambridge, Mass., 1940). For an appreciation of Hansen, see Moses Rischin, "Marcus Lee Hansen: America's First Transethnic Historian," in *Uprooted Americans: Essays to Honor Oscar Handlin*, ed. Richard Bushman et al. (Boston, 1979), 319-47. See also Peter Kivisto and Dag Blanck, eds., *American Immigrants and Their Generations: Studies and Commentaries on the Hansen Thesis after Fifty Years* (Urbana, 1990).

The influence of Park's race relations cycle is apparent everywhere in Handlin's first book, *Boston's Immigrants* (1941). Handlin focused on Irish Catholic immigrants whose old world had been destroyed by the famine of the 1840s and who were utterly unprepared to cope with the competitive, industrializing, Protestant Yankee milieu of antebellum Boston. Yet after a period of severe disorganization characterized by poverty, crime, and family breakdown, the Irish began to adjust. They organized new institutions, seized economic opportunities, and competed successfully against other groups in politics. The Irish had found a niche in Boston society.¹⁷

Handlin's analysis adhered to the first three stages of Park's race relations cycle (contacts, competition, accommodation). But the final stage of Park's cycle—assimilation—played no part. "Though the Irish acquired a secure place in the community," Handlin wrote, "they remained distinct as a group." The climax of the immigrant experience was not the merging with other groups in a new race of men, but the creation of "group consciousness." The Irish had overcome their disorganization and immiseration by forming a cohesive and proud community able to compete for Boston's prized economic and political goods. This process was a kind of Americanization, for the Irish had adjusted to the American milieu. But it was not assimilation nor even emancipation, for the Irish remained subordinate in Boston's social system.¹⁸

By the time Handlin published his classic, *The Uprooted*, a decade later, his view of Americanization had become bleaker still. Handlin reprised the key themes of *Boston's Immigrants*: the breakup of the European peasant's world of land, village, and extended family; the difficult journey to America; and the upheaval in personal and group relationships experienced in the cities and factories of industrializing America. As in *Boston's Immigrants*, the immigrants gradually adjusted to their new surroundings, building churches, joining mutual aid organizations, entering politics, and developing group consciousness. But the groups that these immigrants built seemed less sturdy than those constructed by the protagonists of *Boston's Immigrants*.¹⁹

In *The Uprooted*, Handlin focused on individual immigrants far more than he had in *Boston's Immigrants*, portraying them as ill at ease in the United States, even after their group had successfully adjusted. Handlin admired the immigrants' self-reliance, independence, and resourcefulness; in this sense, they had become true Americans in the Crèvecoeur mold. But these hardy individualists could not escape the loneliness, isolation, and sadness they had felt since their original uprooting. They never found in America the comfort and security they had known in the Old World. They remained forever alien and alienated in their new home.

Handlin's tale raised troubling questions about a society that kept its people in a state of perpetual alienation. Handlin regarded the United States as "the land of

¹⁷ Oscar Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants: A Study in Acculturation* (Cambridge, Mass., 1941).

¹⁸ On Handlin's views about assimilation and Americanization, see Kazal, "Revisiting Assimilation."

¹⁹ Handlin, *Uprooted*.

separated men." Native-born and immigrant Americans alike could count on no established communities, hallowed traditions, or even reflexive habits to give them guidance and instruction. Everything was fluid; every situation required an individual to make a deliberate, rational decision.²⁰

Handlin tried to sustain a belief, reminiscent of Crèvecoeur's fourth claim, that America emancipated its people. The radical individualism demanded of Americans, he suggested, could have liberating, even ennobling, effects. Constant thought and reflection would invigorate the human imagination and, indeed, "all human capacities." Yet writing in the shadow of Nazism and fascism, Handlin worried that ordinary people would find their freedom too hard to manage and would submerge their individuality in groups that promised order, community, and fellow feeling. This flight from freedom had occurred not only in Europe, where totalitarianism had triumphed in the 1930s, but also in the United States, where a growing nativist movement had pressured Congress to curtail immigration in the mid-1920s. That movement, Handlin argued, reflected the weariness of native-born Americans with "constant newness" and their growing desperation for "the security of belonging." Handlin regarded the nativists' triumph as catastrophic, a victory of small-mindedness and conformity over independence and fluidity. Rather than accept the challenge of living as modern men, Americans had retreated into nativist bunkers.²¹

In making this argument, Handlin had joined a very influential discourse on mass society and its deleterious effects on individuality. To David Riesman, William Hollingsworth Whyte, Daniel Bell, and other prominent social critics, it seemed that America had solved the basic problems of production, poverty, and class inequality. But the production of abundance demanded a society of huge bureaucratic organizations—corporations, government agencies, and national labor unions—and these, in the critics' eyes, robbed people of their independence and stifled their initiative. Technological advances had aggravated these tendencies by creating the means (radio, movies, television, and national magazines) for private and state organizations to manipulate popular desire. The new mass media threatened to impose a numbing homogeneity and passivity on American society.²²

To find an antidote to the pressures of mass society, the critics turned to pluralism, a strengthening of civil society by individuals' participation in voluntary organizations. These associations—professional organizations, little leagues, parent-teacher associations (PTAs), bowling leagues, ethnic groups—would occupy the vital middle ground between massive bureaucratic structures and the individual. The stronger, denser, and more varied associational life became, the greater the defense against a bureaucratic order that threatened to conquer civil society. The

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 271–72.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 272–73.

²² David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study in the Changing American Character* (New Haven, 1950); William Hollingsworth Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York, 1956); Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (1960; Cambridge, Mass., 1988). See also Richard H. Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s* (New York, 1985), 183–261.

diversity and energy of pluralism would guard the United States against conformity, mindlessness, and mass tyranny.²³

Few proponents of pluralism knew much about immigrants or ethnic groups. But those who did, such as Handlin, began to use its precepts to turn Crèvecoeur's theory of America on its head. Rather than the American environment emancipating immigrants from their old ways and making them into a new race of men, immigrants, in fashioning their distinctive group consciousness, would save America from its slide into anomie and conformity. The immigrant, by refusing to assimilate completely, would invigorate the nation's democratic institutions. For a member of a mass society, Handlin wrote in 1949, the ethnic group "is one of the surviving signs of his individuality, [offering] affirmation that he is not simply the anonymous citizen, a serial number on a dog tag or social security card, but the son of parents, with roots in the past, with a meaning larger than his own life." Schlesinger affirmed Handlin's perspective by declaring that "a democratic society, based on a genuine cultural pluralism, could go far to supply outlets for the variegated emotions of man, and thus restore meaning to democratic life."²⁴

The full radicalism of Handlin's proposition that ethnic groups would reinvigorate American democracy was rarely evident in the 1950s. These were the years of the Cold War, and for all their frustration with American society, Handlin and Schlesinger were staunchly anticommunist and deeply pro-American. They were unwilling to undermine the reputation of the nation and to weaken its resolve. So it remained for another generation of historians, who cast themselves as Handlin's critics and sought to break out of the Cold War consensus, to realize the full implications of Handlin's approach.

Beyond the Melting Pot, a 1963 study of ethnicity in New York City by Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, is often credited with ending the reign of assimilationist paradigms in ethnic history and sociology. But the arguments of Glazer and Moynihan about the persistence and continual re-creation of ethnicity among Irish, Italian, Jewish, Puerto Rican, and black communities in New York largely followed the analytic lines set forth by Handlin.²⁵ The true break with prevailing interpretations came in a rather obscure article published by Frank Thistlewaite in 1960.

Born, raised, and schooled in England, Thistlewaite was one of the first to bring a European perspective to questions of American immigration. He admired the work of American historians and sociologists on settlement, acculturation, and assimilation, but he criticized their failure to study *emigration*—how Europeans left their homes and began their journey to America. He had been moved by Handlin's

²³ Gary Gerstle, "American Liberals and the Quest for Cultural Pluralism, 1915–1970," 1993 (in Gary Gerstle's possession).

²⁴ Oscar Handlin, "Group Life within the American Pattern: Its Scope and Its Limits," *Commentary*, 8 (Nov. 1949), 411–17, esp. 416; Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Boston, 1949), 253.

²⁵ Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963).

epic tale of uprooting, but he did not regard it as serious history. There were no real emigrants in Handlin's story, just mythologized peasants who lived in the same simple, secure circumstances for hundreds of years until cosmic forces expelled them from their Eden. This story bore no relevance to the British emigrants Thistlewaite had studied: Lancashire textile workers, Welsh ironworkers, Yorkshire coal miners, Cornish tin miners, and Staffordshire potters—all skilled workers, veterans of the British industrial revolution who had emigrated to the United States and catalyzed industrialization in that country. Not only did these emigrants retain their occupations in America, they also "preserved the folk customs, speech patterns, the foods and drinks, music, and sports of those Welsh valleys, Lancashire towns, and Cornish mining villages whence they came, to a second and even third generation."²⁶

Thistlewaite's 1960 essay, "Migration from Europe Overseas in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," was startling in its revelations. He estimated that as many as a third of the 33 million European immigrants who came to the United States between 1821 and 1924 repatriated. In certain periods, such as the first two decades of the twentieth century, the percentage of return migrants was considerably higher; and among some groups, such as the Balkan peoples, the repatriation rate may have reached an astounding 89 percent.²⁷

Thistlewaite also argued that many of the immigrants were skilled industrial workers. The largest such group came from the British Isles, but important streams came from countries such as Italy, which most historians regarded as a prime source of Handlinesque peasants. Numerous Italian emigrants came from the rural areas that Handlin had emphasized, but even they did not fit Handlin's portrait of innocent peasants overwhelmed by the forces of modernization. Many had already participated in capitalist wage labor. Thistlewaite referred, for example, to the Peloponnese, an impoverished rural district in Greece, where families often sent "a boy of ten or twelve away to the cities of Greece or Turkey to earn money for his parents, often in brutal conditions, as a bootblack or in a coffeehouse or grocery store." For these Greek peasants, migration to America was not a sharp break from their way of life, but rather a transatlantic version of accustomed journeys within well-established regional labor markets. And just as the boys who went to Greek and Turkish cities saw their trips as efforts to augment their families' incomes, the migrants to America wanted to earn high wages and to help their families back home. Many intended to return to Europe. Some became seasonal migrants, treating the Atlantic as a lake that had to be crossed twice a year on the way to and from work.²⁸

²⁶ Frank Thistlewaite, "Postscript," in *Century of European Migrations*, ed. Vecoli and Sinke, 55.

²⁷ Thistlewaite, "Migration from Europe Overseas in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," 17–49, esp. 25. The records on return migrants were problematic, and they frustrated efforts to develop precise percentages. Nevertheless, historians agree that the number of return migrants far exceeded what Oscar Handlin, Robert E. Park, and others thought possible. See Mark Wyman, *Round-Trip America: The Immigrants Return to Europe, 1880–1930* (Ithaca, 1993), 3–14.

²⁸ Thistlewaite, "Migration from Europe Overseas in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," esp. 29. Patterns of migration established themselves, not from Greece and Italy to America, but from particular European towns to particular neighborhoods in American cities; Thistlewaite used the phrase "chain migration" to describe this phenomenon.

Thistlewaite did little new research for his article. Rather, he drew on existing historical work that had been ignored by scholars working in the dominant Handlin school and on migration statistics compiled by demographers and labor statisticians. Thistlewaite raised more questions than he answered. But he threw down the gauntlet to the Handlin school: "Whatever else the experience may have meant, migration often did not mean settlement and acculturation."²⁹

For Rudolph Vecoli, then a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin, reading Thistlewaite's essay was exhilarating. It profoundly shaped his dissertation on Italian laborers in Chicago. His first article, "The *Contadini* of Chicago" (1964), declared war on the Handlinesque concept of uprooting.³⁰ Other young historians also took up Thistlewaite's challenge to rethink the migration story, and over the next twenty years, they changed the face of immigration history. They were influenced not just by Thistlewaite's article, but by the radicalization of the academy in the 1960s. They cast themselves as critics of American society—of its capitalist economy, bourgeois individualist culture, and imperialist foreign policy. They rediscovered Karl Marx, sought evidence of conflict rather than adjustment in American history, and loathed the idea of assimilation.³¹

Their three major findings have had profound implications for our understanding of immigrants, ethnic culture, and American identity:

First, immigrants to the United States frequently considered their journey as travel from one job to another, rather than from one nation to another. They came to make good money in order to help their families or to buy their own farms back home. This instrumental orientation explains the early demographic profiles of most groups of the new immigrants (including Italians, Slavs, and Greeks)—men vastly outnumbered women and children. At the outset, this was a migration not of families, but of young men in search of work.³²

Second, immigrants brought their ethnic cultures with them and nourished

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

³⁰ Rudolph J. Vecoli, "Introduction," in *Century of European Migrations*, ed. Vecoli and Sinke, 3; Rudolph J. Vecoli, "Chicago's Italians prior to World War I: A Study of Their Social and Economic Adjustment" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1962); Vecoli, "Contadini in Chicago."

³¹ The key works in this school include Vecoli, "Contadini in Chicago"; Victor H. Greene, *Slavic Community on Strike* (South Bend, 1968); Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America*, 3-78; Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, *Family and Community: Italian Immigrants in Buffalo, 1880-1930* (Ithaca, 1982); Tamara K. Hareven, *Family Time and Industrial Time: The Relationship between the Family and Work in a New England Industrial Community* (New York, 1982); Dirk Hoerder, ed., *American Labor and Immigration History, 1877-1920: Recent European Research* (Urbana, 1983); Dick Hoerder, ed., *Labor Migration in the Atlantic Economies: The European and North American Working Classes during the Period of Industrialization* (Westport, 1985); Donna R. Gabaccia, *From Sicily to Elizabeth Street: Housing and Social Change among Italian Immigrants, 1880-1930* (Albany, 1984); Donna R. Gabaccia, *Militants and Migrants: Rural Sicilians Become American Workers* (New Brunswick, 1988); John E. Bodnar, *Workers' World: Kinship, Community, and Protest in an Industrial Society* (Baltimore, 1982); Ewa Morawska, *For Bread with Butter: The Life-Worlds of East Central Europeans in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, 1890-1940* (New York, 1985); and Bruno Ramirez, *On the Move: French-Canadian and Italian Migrants in the North Atlantic Economy, 1860-1914* (Toronto, 1991). For a magisterial synthesis, see John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants to Urban America* (Bloomington, 1985).

³² The Irish and Jewish migrations were exceptions to this pattern. See Thomas Kessner, *The Golden Door: Italian and Jewish Immigrant Mobility in New York City, 1880-1915* (New York, 1977); and Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York, 1985).

them in America. Suffering little or none of the disorganization Handlin emphasized, they quickly reestablished cultural institutions dear to them in the Old World—churches and synagogues, festivals, socialist and anarchist organizations, nationalist groups, athletic clubs, and musical societies—and developed new ones, such as foreign-language newspapers and mutual benefit societies. They used extended kin and ethnic networks to help each other find work, to challenge capricious employer power, and to assist those in need. They were not lonely individuals overwhelmed by modernity, but members of cohesive groups capable of purposive action.

These immigrants protested developments that threatened the integrity or survival of their ethnic institutions and cultures. The protests took many forms: Italian parents refused to send their children to public schools where they would be exposed to Americanizing influences; French Canadian and Polish Catholics refused to attend Mass said by an Irish, Americanizing priest; immigrant groups established schools where the language of their homeland—Polish, Lithuanian, French, Italian, Yiddish—was taught; and Slavic coal miners, Italian laborers, and Jewish garment workers banded together in labor organizations to protest wages and working conditions that threatened the health of their families and ethnic communities.³³

Third, assimilation and Americanization acted only as negative forces in this new immigrant history. In the eyes of the new historians, most immigrants did not fit the Crèvecoeurian mold. The immigrants did not want to become American; they were sojourners in a harsh capitalist land, hoping to cut the best deal they could and then to leave. Many of those forced to stay still regarded their ethnic cultures as superior to and more humane than the cutthroat, competitive culture they encountered in America. In the premodern collectivism and communal morality upheld by their ethno-religious cultures, they found the means to criticize America's harsh individualism. In a seminal essay, "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America" (1973), Herbert Gutman showed how ethnic groups had used cultural practices—"peasant parades and rituals, religious oaths and food riots"—to protest the exploitative practices of American capitalism. He found, for example, this newspaper account of an oath taken by Slavic steelworkers striking in Hammond, Indiana: "The lights of the hall were extinguished. A candle stuck into a bottle was placed on a platform. One by one the men came and kissed the ivory image on the cross, kneeling before it. They swore not to scab."³⁴

Americanization, to Gutman and others, meant surrender to a capitalist order. This capitulation made sense only for those immigrants who had risen far enough in that order to make capitalism work for them: small businessmen, manufacturers,

³³ The new immigrant historians disagreed over the importance of the immigrant family. To some, such as Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, Tamara K. Hareven, and John Bodnar, it was by far the most important cultural institution. They tended to see churches, musical societies, and newspapers as belonging to small, middle-class ethnic elites or to groups outside the ethnic community. But other historians, such as Herbert G. Gutman and Victor H. Greene, saw the family as only one of the institutions that gave ethnic groups cohesion.

³⁴ Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America*, 66, 65. For another example, see *ibid.*, 62. See also Greene, *Slavic Community on Strike*.

professionals, journalists, urban bosses, and gangsters. But for the majority of immigrants stuck in the working class, Americanization meant only acquiescence in their oppression. Thus, when these new historians of immigration dealt with Americanization at all, they regarded it in class terms, as a cultural strategy deployed by employers and their ethnic middle-class allies to augment their wealth and power. By enhancing the ethnic elites' access to power, Americanization also increased their influence and control over their own ethnic communities.³⁵

In the new immigration histories, then, Americanizing elites were frequently pitted against tradition-minded masses. The elites were intent on becoming Crèvecoeurian "new men"; the masses wanted to remain who they were. The new men embraced bourgeois individualism while the masses clung to a premodern European collectivism. The European masses' only hope for emancipation was to use their premodern cultures to resist capitalist practices and the false bourgeois consciousness that dominated American culture.

In equating the maintenance of ethnic culture with emancipation, Vecoli, Gutman, and other new immigration historians had arrived at a position similar to Handlin's. Handlin, to be sure, had not made class an important component of his analysis of immigrant communities, nor did he consider that immigrants of one class might have benefited—or suffered—from Americanization more than those of another. Moreover, Handlin had argued that the cultures of ethnic groups had been created in America and were not simple carry-overs from Europe. Still, the perception shared by Handlin and Gutman that American society was exploitative and alienating might have generated a stimulating dialogue between the two camps.

This was not to be. By the time Gutman had published his 1973 article, Handlin had become a thoroughly alienated man, disgusted by the radicalism of the 1960s and by the grim view of America put forward by the radical historians. He had stopped arguing about the loneliness and isolation of Americans and had started emphasizing the positive features of American society. No fruitful interchanges between the two men or the two camps took place, and the field was the poorer for it.³⁶

The influence of the Gutman-Vecoli school was huge. A wholly new picture of American society for the period from 1880 to 1920 emerged. American cities were full of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe, many of whom—perhaps a majority—had no intention of staying in America. They were here to work, to save money, and to return home. They clung tenaciously to their ethnic heritages and never experienced the Handlinesque period of disorganization and isolation.

³⁵ For an interpretation of Americanization as a cultural weapon wielded by elites against the immigrant masses, see John J. Bukowczyk, "The Transformation of Working-Class Ethnicity: Corporate Control, Americanization, and the Polish Immigrant Middle Class in Bayonne, New Jersey, 1915–1925," *Labor History*, 25 (Winter 1984), 53–82. See also Kerby A. Miller, "Class, Culture, and Immigrant Group Identity in the United States: The Case of Irish-American Ethnicity," in *Immigration Reconsidered: History, Sociology, and Politics*, ed. Virginia Yans-McLaughlin (New York, 1990), 96–129; Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*; Gerd Korman, "Americanization at the Factory Gate," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 18 (April 1965), 396–419; and Stephen Meyer, "Adapting the Immigrant to the Line: Americanization in the Ford Factory, 1914–1921," *Journal of Social History*, 14 (Fall 1980), 67–82. The Bukowczyk, Korman, and Meyer articles have been reprinted with others on this theme in George E. Pozzetta, ed., *Americanization, Social Control, and Philanthropy* (New York, 1991).

³⁶ I can testify to this personally. I was a graduate student at Harvard in the late 1970s, excited by Gutman and intrigued by Handlin, but there could be no conversation with Handlin about Gutman.

Many were indifferent to the United States, others hostile to a capitalist society that promised much but offered its workers inadequate welfare and safety. An extraordinarily large number displayed their alienation by refusing to naturalize or participate in American politics. As late as 1920, less than a third of immigrants from Poland, Austria, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, and Portugal had become citizens. There were exceptions to this pattern, most notably among Jewish immigrants from Russia. But the pattern remained striking.³⁷ The new historians of immigration had uncovered and celebrated an early multicultural age. The retreat from assimilationist and Crèvecoeurian paradigms was complete.

The Return to Americanization

One of the strengths of the new historians—a single-minded focus on the years of the new immigration—was also a weakness. These scholars had relatively little to say about old immigrant groups, most notably the British, Irish, Germans, and Scandinavians who had arrived in the first wave of immigration, and how they maintained cultural traditions and experienced Americanization across the generations. Nor did they grapple with an inescapable and uncomfortable fact: As indifferent or hostile to America as they may have been prior to 1920, a majority of the new immigrants stayed. They eventually naturalized, voted, and identified themselves as Americans. Some had completed this process by 1930, most by 1940 or 1950. And, for many of those immigrants, acquiring an American identity meant more than filling in naturalization forms or casting ballots. It triggered a profound patriotic awakening and an embrace of the idea of America. This emergent patriotism was apparent in the new immigrants' affection for Franklin D. Roosevelt, in their enthusiastic embrace of American ideals during World War II, and in the "America—love it or leave it" attitude with which many of their descendants reacted to student radicals of the 1960s. How did this transformation from immigrant to American occur? Had the new immigrant historians overemphasized the retention of ethnic cultures and the opposition to Americanization before 1920? Or did external social and political forces compel the immigrants to change their attitudes? Historians offered several responses.

One response, forcefully expressed by Lawrence H. Fuchs in *The American Kaleidoscope* (1990), was that the opposition between Americanization and ethnic persistence was false. "Immigrant settlers and their progeny," Fuchs argued, "were free to maintain . . . loyalty to their ancestral religions and cultures while . . . claiming an American identity by embracing the founding myths and participating in the political life of the nation." In Fuchs's telling, if immigrants declared their allegiance to the American political ideals of democracy and individual rights and to the founding documents—the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights—they became participants in the country's "civic culture." But the civic culture governed only political participation, leaving questions of

³⁷ *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, 1st ed., sv. "Naturalization and Citizenship."

religion, morals, customs, and traditions to the individual. Many immigrants chose to retain their ethnic culture, creating a system of "voluntary pluralism" that became a defining characteristic of American society. Immigrants, Fuchs argued, were devoted to the United States because it maximized their freedom to be Germans, Slovenes, or Jews. In a sense, Fuchs had rehabilitated the Americanization formula that German immigrants had pioneered in the nineteenth century, by declaring that they would become American in politics while remaining German in culture.³⁸

Fuchs did not shrink from pointing out the discriminations visited on newcomers, but he regarded these acts as ephemeral. American history became a saga of the civic culture realizing itself, eventually opening itself even to minority groups—blacks, Indians, Asians, Mexicans—who had long been excluded from democratic participation and from voluntary pluralism.

In a work eloquent in argument and encyclopedic in scope, Fuchs married the research findings of the new immigration historians, particularly their emphasis on the survival of ethnic cultures, to a neo-Crèvecoeurian interpretive agenda stressing the emancipatory character of American society. It may seem surprising to place Fuchs in Crèvecoeur's camp. Fuchs had no use for Crèvecoeur's notion that America witnessed the creation of a "new race of men"; indeed, he believed that America gave the "old races" unprecedented opportunities to express their native cultures.³⁹ Yet, his view of America as a land of extraordinary freedom without the constraints of the Old World renders him a Crèvecoeurian emancipationist.

Fuchs offered a wonderful solution to the cultural tensions of our own time by declaring, in essence, that we should not worry about them. The long history of intergroup relations in America showed that immigrants who practiced their ethnic traditions were, despite appearances to the contrary, becoming Americans. If only the process had been so easy. Fuchs might have made his case more convincing if he had admitted that some ethnic groups had lost their cultures in America and that the Americanization of European immigrants occasionally entailed coercion rather than emancipation. He might have emphasized the experience of German Americans who, until World War I, easily balanced their dual identities as Americans and Germans. Even as assimilation was eroding this group's Germanness, many individuals within it maintained a vigorous ethnic identity and married it to a deep American patriotism. But the anti-German hysteria and Americanization

³⁸ Fuchs, *American Kaleidoscope*, esp. 15. This Americanization formula had survived the assault on German American ethnicity in World War I largely through the work of the Harvard-trained German Jewish philosopher Horace Kallen and his disciples. The German, or German American, roots of Kallen's pluralism have not, to my knowledge, been explored. On Kallen, see Gerstle, "Protean Character of American Liberalism"; Sarah Schmidt, *Horace M. Kallen: Prophet of American Zionism* (Brooklyn, 1995); and Michael Walzer, *What It Means to Be an American: Essays on the American Experience* (New York, 1992). On the Germans' Americanization formula, see Kathleen Neils Conzen, "German-Americans and the Invention of Ethnicity," *America and the Germans: An Assessment of a Three Hundred Year History*, ed. Frank Trommler and Joseph McVeigh (2 vols., Philadelphia, 1985), I, 131–47.

³⁹ Ethnic cultures became stronger in the United States than they had been in their native lands through a process of ethnicization. Lawrence H. Fuchs quoted Louis Adamic's claim that America allowed his *Slovenstvo* (love of Slovene traditions) "wider and fuller expression than I could ever have found had I remained at home." Fuchs did not note that the Slovenes of Europe had no state of their own and were denied autonomy in celebrating Slovene traditions. Fuchs, *American Kaleidoscope*, 70–71.

crusades of World War I made this pluralist experiment impossible to sustain. After that time, Germans could no longer be American in politics and German in culture; they had to be American through and through.⁴⁰ Fuchs could still have drawn up a balance sheet, demonstrating that the ethnic groups who benefited from Americanization outnumbered those who did not. Such a strategy would have made his interpretation more compelling and influential.

Fuchs was not alone in his tendency to overlook instances of ethnic loss and patriotic coercion. Much the same message emerged from *Beyond Ethnicity*, published in 1986. Its author, Werner Sollors, a professor of American literature at Harvard University, did not deny the importance of ethnic identity in the American past or present. But he launched an all-out attack on those who stressed its inherited character and who portrayed it as a force invariably opposed to a common "Americanness." Surveying ethnic literature, Sollors uncovered "a grammar of new world imagery and conduct." "Images of exodus and deliverance, newness and rebirth, melting pot and romantic love, jeremiads against establishment figures and lost generations" were the "central codes of Americanness" that, according to Sollors, contributed to "the construction of new forms of symbolic kinship among people who are not blood relatives." Some of the codes of Americanness developed by ethnic writers, such as the melting pot motif, entailed an explicit repudiation of Old World traditions and an embrace of the possibilities of the New. But in Sollors's eyes, becoming American could just as easily entail the invention of new ethnic traditions. Among others he mentioned bebop (a reaction against the appropriation of jazz by whites) and the bat mitzvah (marking the transition of Jewish girls into womanhood). Ethnic groups invented these traditions to maintain their cultural distinctiveness amid pressures toward cultural homogenization. The embrace or creation of an ethnic identity, Sollors argued, allowed Americans to steer a "middle course between ancient narrowness and vulgar monotony. By creating new, not traditionally anchored, group identities and by authenticating them, they could represent individuality and American identity at the same time." Sollors repudiated the view of ethnicity as a "tradition" opposing modernization. Instead he viewed ethnic identity as the highest expression of modernism.⁴¹

Unlike Fuchs, Sollors had little to say about how the American political heritage permitted, even encouraged, such ethnic attachments. For him, America was less a political democracy than a modern mass society, and the celebration of one's ethnicity was less a declaration of equality than an affirmation of individuality in a stultifying, monochromatic world.⁴²

⁴⁰ The definitive account of the German American experience has yet to be written. Suggestive works include Frederick C. Luebke, *Bonds of Loyalty: German Americans and World War I* (DeKalb, 1974); David W. DeJen, *The Germans in Missouri, 1900–1918: Prohibition, Neutrality, and Assimilation* (Columbia, Mo., 1985); Melvin G. Holli, "The Great War Sinks Chicago's German Kultur," in *Ethnic Chicago*, ed. Melvin G. Holli and Peter d'A. Jones (Grand Rapids, 1984), 460–512; and James Berquist, "German Communities in American Cities: An Interpretation of the Nineteenth Century Experience," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 4 (Fall 1984), 9–30.

⁴¹ Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity*, esp. 7, 207, 241–47. See also Werner Sollors, ed., *The Invention of Ethnicity* (New York, 1989).

⁴² In this regard, Sollors rehabilitated a theme that Handlin stressed in *The Uprooted*.



Becoming Ethnic and American

This photo of Chicago Italians celebrating the feast of Santa Maria Inconornata illustrates the argument of Lawrence Fuchs and Werner Sollors that the American environment enabled ethnic cultures to flourish. The feast celebrates Italian Americanness as much as it does the madonna herself, and dollars appended to the madonna's streamers represented a new, Americanized way for individuals to pursue good fortune or forgiveness.

Courtesy Italian American Collection Special Collections, University Library, University of Illinois at Chicago.

Sollors shared with Fuchs the conviction that to declare an ethnic identity was, at bottom, a way of becoming American. He too believed the American experience encouraged the creation of ethnic loyalties. With one or two exceptions, Sollors did not dwell on ethnic inventions or notions of Americanness that failed.⁴³ America was once again, as it had been for Crèvecoeur, the land of possibility.

Sollors, like Fuchs, had repudiated the third aspect of the Crèvecoeurian myth, which claimed that all American immigrants would fuse into one people, alike in their language, customs, and sense of what constituted Americanness. Not only

⁴³ For the principal exception, see Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity*, 191–95.

did Sollors's pluralistic America offer immigrants multiple "codes of Americanism" from which to choose, but the choosing and creating of identities had no clear beginning or end. An identity adopted one year could be changed the next; one could choose ethnicization over assimilation and still be thoroughly immersed in becoming American. Sollors's America was characterized by a multitude, even cacophony, of voices, each of them "truly American." Crèvecoeur no doubt would have been discomfited by this American Babel. But he might have recognized in Sollors's vision something that infused his own work: enthusiasm for the emancipatory spirit that would let individuals in America toss off their inheritances and embrace the freedom to be something entirely of their own choosing.

Sollors drew on and contributed to the deconstructionist movement then sweeping through literature and American studies departments. He exposed the uncritical and simplistic ways in which the new historians of immigration had sometimes approached questions of tradition and culture. He denied any opposition between ethnic and American culture. Scholars delighted in the mind play of Sollors's account of identities destabilized, inverted, and re-created. Soon Sollors's views on ethnicity began to influence American immigration historians. His book took on added significance because it paralleled work by Eric Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger, Herbert J. Gans, and Mary C. Waters on the "invention of tradition," "symbolic ethnicity," and "ethnic options."⁴⁴

Sollors's influence among historians was strikingly apparent in a 1992 article by five prominent immigration scholars. Kathleen Neils Conzen, David Gerber, Ewa Morawska, George Pozzetta, and Rudolph Vecoli made clear their debt to Sollors by asserting that

ethnic groups in modern settings are constantly recreating themselves, and ethnicity is continuously being reinvented in response to changing realities both within the group and the host society. . . . Ethnic group boundaries . . . must be continuously renegotiated, while expressive symbols of ethnicity (ethnic traditions) must be repeatedly reinterpreted.⁴⁵

The Conzen group established a theoretical distance from Sollors, asserting that ethnicity was more than a "collective fiction," that its destabilization and re-creation assumed "preexisting communal solidarities, cultural attributes, and historical memories" that were "grounded in real life." Moreover, historical context mattered in ways that Sollors had disregarded: "the timing of migrations, the stage of development in country of origin and in country of destination, the incidence of economic and political cycles, . . . generational transitions," and places of settlement—all shaped ethnic invention. But the authors attempted to account for so many variations in ethnicization that they did less to show the influence of historical circum-

⁴⁴ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (1983; Cambridge, Eng., 1992); Herbert J. Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 2 (Jan. 1979), 1–20; Mary C. Waters, *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America* (Berkeley, 1990).

⁴⁵ Kathleen Neils Conzen et al., "The Invention of Ethnicity: A Perspective from the U.S.A.," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 12 (Fall 1992), 3–41, esp. 5.

stances and structures than to reproduce Sollors's emphasis on the "continual renegotiation of identities."⁴⁶ Still, they showed good instincts in combining emphasis on the inventiveness of ethnic groups with attention to the social structures and historical context that shaped, and sometimes undid, their cultural inventions.

Historians who were not inspired by Sollors had made progress in achieving the synthesis between agency and structure that had eluded the Conzen group.⁴⁷ Most successful were studies of the interaction between mass culture and traditional immigrant cultures. Like Sollors, the authors of those studies were impressed by the cultural ingenuity of the immigrants, but they treated such ingenuity as one subject to failure and social constraint.

While these scholars recognized the persistence of ethnic cultures in the New World, they wondered what happened when those ethnic cultures encountered the vaudeville theaters, amusement parks, baseball stadia, movie theaters, and radio culture of the early-twentieth-century United States. That the rise of these mass-cultural institutions constituted a central event in American history was hardly a novel observation. David Riesman, Daniel Bell, Theodor W. Adorno, and others had made that case in the 1940s and 1950s.⁴⁸ Some historians built on that work by arguing that the rise of mass culture had made ordinary citizens passive and susceptible to manipulation and had thus weakened American democracy.⁴⁹ But such a story line could not easily comprehend the experience of European immigrants and their children.

In the new historical studies of mass culture, immigrants figured as enthusiastic participants in the emerging entertainment industries. At the movies, immigrants could escape the dour supervision of the Protestant Americanizers who controlled recreation on urban playgrounds. In amusement parks and dance halls, young single women could elude the surveillance of prudish immigrant parents and explore their sexuality with young men. As movie theater and dance hall owners and, later, as movie moguls, immigrant entrepreneurs discovered opportunities to make money. And immigrant artists invented new kinds of theater, art, and comedy, inspired

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 4-5, 12, 6. This may reflect the perils of joint authorship. Individual works of these authors are more successful in situating ethnic invention in specific historical settings. See, particularly, David Gerber, *The Making of an American Pluralism: Buffalo, New York, 1825-1860* (Urbana, 1989); and Conzen, "German-Americans and the Invention of Ethnicity."

⁴⁷ One of the most interesting such efforts is John Higham, "From Process to Structure: Formulations of American Immigration History," in *American Immigrants and Their Generations*, ed. Kivisto and Blanck, 11-41.

⁴⁸ Riesman, *Lone Crowd*; Bell, *End of Ideology*; Theodor W. Adorno with George Simpson, "On Popular Music," *Studies in Philosophy and Social Sciences*, 9 (1941); and Theodor W. Adorno, "A Social Critique of Radio Music," *Kenyon Review*, 7 (Spring 1945), 208-17. This case was made in the 1920s. See Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (New York, 1925); and Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in American Culture* (New York, 1929). On the 1950s critique of mass culture, see Pells, *Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age*, 183-261.

⁴⁹ See, in particular, Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears, eds., *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980* (New York, 1983); and Christopher Lasch, *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times* (New York, 1984).

by the American urban milieu in which they lived. In short, many immigrants viewed the new mass culture as a realm of freedom, opportunity, and invention. But did their participation in these institutions lead to rapid Americanization?⁵⁰

Popular writers, such as Neal Gabler, say yes. A favorite theme of their biographies of entertainers and sports stars is the desire of the immigrant or his child to escape the confines of an ethnic culture and to embrace "America." Involvement in the world of mass entertainment expanded an individual's circle of contacts and immersed him or her in a distinctively American celebrity culture. Moreover, the quest for profits pushed participants to develop movies, radio programs, and games with national appeal. Over the long term, mass culture undoubtedly promoted the Americanization of those ethnics directly involved in the entertainment industries. But in the short term, there were intriguing twists and turns.⁵¹

Roy Rosenzweig's study of workers and leisure in Worcester, Massachusetts, for example, shows how early movie theaters—storefront nickelodeons—were extensions of ethnic working-class neighborhoods. Patrons brought into the theaters an ethnic, working-class style of public behavior. Friends engaged in boisterous camaraderie. Customers offered loud, running commentaries on the movies and tolerated the crying babies who had been dragged along by mothers and older siblings determined to catch a show. Elizabeth Cohen, in her study of Chicago workers, found that the fusion of movie theater and ethnic neighborhood persisted well into the 1920s. Movie theaters, then, were not simply sites where parochial-minded immigrants were exposed to modern American values; they were also places where ethnic communities constituted themselves and their cultures. Early radio, Cohen discovered, served a similar purpose. Most Chicago stations carried "nationality hours," and as many as four stations were devoted entirely to ethnic programming.⁵²

Ethnic radio programming cannot be understood simply as an effort to reproduce Old World traditions in the New World. An Italian-language radio hour, for example, had to appeal to all Italians in Chicago, and that meant emphasizing, even inventing, aspects of Italian culture and experience that transcended specific villages and regions. These radio programs also had to address the specific concerns of Italians in Chicago. Thus, radio culture was a blend of the old and the new.⁵³

⁵⁰ Among other works, see Kathy Lee Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia, 1986); David Nasaw, *Children of the City: At Work and at Play* (New York, 1985); Elizabeth Ewen, *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars: Life and Culture on the Lower East Side, 1890-1925* (New York, 1985); Lewis A. Erenberg, *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930* (Westport, 1981); Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will*; and Robert W. Snyder, *The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York* (New York, 1989). On similar patterns after 1945; see George Lipsitz, "Land of a Thousand Dances: Youth, Minorities, and the Rise of Rock and Roll," in *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of the Cold War*, ed. Lary May (Chicago, 1989), 267-84; and George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis, 1990).

⁵¹ Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York, 1988). See also John Raeburn, "Introduction," in *Frank Capra: The Man and His Films*, ed. Richard Glatzer and John Raeburn (Ann Arbor, 1975); and Edward G. Robinson with Leonard Spigelgass, *All My Yesterdays* (New York, 1973). Celebrity culture itself can be treated as a cultural invention that changed American culture. See Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1984).

⁵² Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will*, 181-228; Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 99-147.

⁵³ On the Mexican encounter with mass culture in Los Angeles, see George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York, 1993), 171-87.

Irving Howe offered a wonderful illustration of this phenomenon in his discussion of Yiddish theater. Yiddish theater may appear a simple carry-over of traditions from Europe. In fact, Yiddish theater flowered only after Jews had left the shtetls for the urban and secularizing environments of Polish and American cities. The theater that developed in New York drew heavily not only on Jewish folk materials but also on William Shakespeare (among the plays written for the New York Yiddish stage were *The Jewish King Lear* and *Raphael and Shaindele*, a Yiddish version of *Romeo and Juliet*) and Leo Tolstoy, Ivan Turgenev, and other great figures of nineteenth-century Russian literature. In the actors' pursuit of virtuosity and in the passion and unruliness of the enthusiastic audiences, Yiddish theater resembled vaudeville and Italian opera. It was clearly a hybrid institution, possible only after Jews had been released from shtetl life, learned more about other groups' artistic traditions, and gained freedom from both gentile rulers and local rabbis. But it was unquestionably a Jewish institution, accessible only to those who spoke Yiddish, and it stimulated "vast outpourings of creative energy" that "made the performance of a Yiddish play an occasion for communal pleasure." Yiddish theater helped to create and define Jewish identity in the United States. In this instance, the advent of mass culture had increased the possibilities of ethnic invention and affirmation.⁵⁴

The stories of the early days of movies, radio, and ethnic theater seem to fit Sollors's analysis of how immigrants found endless opportunities to invent and reinvent their ethnicities in America.⁵⁵ But the stories do not end there. In the movies, the coming of (English) sound and the cultivation by moviemakers and theater owners of middle-class patrons ended the era of the raucous working-class audience. By the 1930s, powerful national radio stations had marginalized many of the local, foreign-language stations that had flourished in the 1920s. And the Yiddish theater proved too eclectic and unstable an institution to thrive much beyond World War I. Technological change, middle-class power and assertiveness, corporate consolidation in the media industries, Americanization movements, and generational succession within ethnic communities—all contributed to the collapse of cultural inventions. Historical circumstances and social structures undermined experiments in the fashioning of identity.

The double sense of inventiveness and constraint shaped my study of how French Canadian workers in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, in the interwar years attempted to bend and twist Americanism to fit their needs and aspirations. Theirs was not a misguided project, I argued, for Americanism was a flexible political language that could accommodate a variety of ideologies and beliefs, including those that promoted working-class emancipation. Like Sollors, I emphasized the multiple "codes of Americanness"; like Crèvecoeur, I showed how "new world imagery" lent itself to visions of personal deliverance and social transformation. The city's trade-

⁵⁴ Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 460–96. See also Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), esp. 85–104.

⁵⁵ Indeed, Sollors offers a brief commentary on Yiddish theater that touches on some of the same points made by Howe. Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity*, 247–48.

union activists portrayed their fight for "industrial democracy" as the latest episode in the American struggle for freedom that had begun with the Pilgrims and the Founding Fathers.⁵⁶

But the Woonsocket story was not ultimately about freedom. The working-class Americanism that flourished in the 1930s was gone by the late 1940s. Some labor activists had been run out of town, and those who stayed, under the pressure first of war conformity and then of deindustrialization, had relinquished their own Americanism and embraced one that originated in Washington bureaucracies and corporate boardrooms. In Woonsocket state and class power undermined the autonomy and extinguished the inventiveness of one group of Americans-in-the-making. My story became a tale of America as not simply a Crèvecoeurian land of possibility but also a land of constraint. There was much to be lost, as well as gained, through Americanization.

The relatively few studies of gender and American identity also suggest that Americanization involves both inventiveness and constraint. Elizabeth Ewen has shown how Jewish and Italian working-class women in early-twentieth-century New York forged a "working-class Americanism" of their own, only to see their more acculturated daughters relinquish it in the 1920s and 1930s. Gwendolyn Mink has explored how Progressive reformers used Americanization campaigns to strip immigrant women of their Old World ways—their foods, clothes, housekeeping and child-rearing habits—and imposed white, middle-class, "American" notions of domesticity. Yet those reformers, Mink acknowledges, believed Americanization would emancipate immigrant women and their children, giving them the behavioral and cognitive tools needed to lift themselves to the "American" level. And Americanization sometimes worked this way, especially for the male children of immigrant mothers, who found in public schools opportunities for education and socioeconomic advancement. Immigrant mothers and their daughters gained few of these benefits, because Americanizers insisted that motherhood and homemaking constituted a woman's only proper roles. For this reason, Mink views Americanization as more coercive than liberatory. Still, she has begun developing a gendered framework that allows her to see Americanization as doubled-sided, as a source of both freedom and repression. Other scholars should follow Mink's lead, making the home and family life central to the study of Americanization and staying alert to the complexity and contradictory nature of the Americanizing process.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Gary Gerstle, *Working-Class Americanism: The Politics of Labor in a Textile City* (New York, 1989), esp. 1–15, 153–95; 278–309. See also James R. Barrett, "Americanization from the Bottom Up: Immigration and the Remaking of the Working Class in the United States, 1880–1930," *Journal of American History*, 79 (Dec. 1992), 996–1020; Andrew Neather, "Labor Republicanism, Race, and Popular Patriotism in the Era of Empire, 1890–1914," in *Bonds of Affection: Americans Define Their Patriotism*, ed. John Bodnar (Princeton, 1996), 82–101; and Joseph McCartin, "'An American Feeling': Workers, Managers, and the Struggle over Industrial Democracy in the World War I Era," in *Industrial Democracy: The Ambiguous Promise*, ed. Nelson Lichtenstein and Howell John Harris (New York, 1993), 67–86.

⁵⁷ Ewen, *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars*; Gwendolyn Mink, *Wages of Motherhood*. See also Eileen Boris, "The Racialized Gendered State: Constructions of Citizenship in the United States," *Social Politics*, 2 (Summer 1995), 160–80; McClymer, "Gender and the 'American Way of Life,'" and Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American*, 98–107.



Conflicting Paths of Americanization

This Yiddish newspaper cartoon (above and to the right) shows Jewish immigrants in early twentieth-century New York negotiating between the world of uptown New York, where they behaved as "Americans," and their own world of Yiddish theater, where they revealed their "true" boisterous and unruly selves. Because the Yiddish theater was an "American" invention, the struggle is between alternative ways of becoming American. One way affirmed ethnicity as a defining feature of Americanness, the other denied it. In this instance, denial eventually triumphed.

Reproduced from Nabma Sandrow, Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater (New York, 1977).

Race, Nation, and the Making of Americans

For many years, immigration historians paid little attention to questions of race. Immigration history was conceived of in Eurocentric terms. The histories of non-white, non-European immigrants—Chinese, Japanese, Mexicans, and others—were ignored by most of the major figures in American immigration history and sociology. The relations between European immigrants and blacks received almost no attention. Studies of nonwhite groups were regarded as irrelevant to the main drama of transatlantic migration. It is hardly accidental that the nation's greatest monument to the immigrant—the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor—affirms the Eurocentric tradition and marginalizes the experience of those who came to the United States via the Pacific or across the Rio Grande.

There was a justification for this bias: From 1880 to 1920, the period when the



Statue of Liberty was erected, Europeans formed 75 percent of the immigrant population. But that is not the whole story. Three hundred thousand Chinese immigrants arrived in the United States between 1851 and 1882. They might have formed one of the country's largest immigrant groups had Congress not barred them from entering the United States from the 1880s through the early 1940s. The government shut down the immigration of Japanese male laborers in 1907 and of virtually all other Asians in 1917.⁵⁸

Nor were these the first instances of a racialized immigration policy. The First Congress, meeting in 1790, decreed that only free white immigrants were eligible for citizenship. In 1870, Congress amended this law in order to make free African immigrants eligible for citizenship. But the barriers to citizenship for nonwhite Asian immigrants remained in force until the 1950s. Americanization acquired its white, European cast at the country's creation; prejudice against nonwhites shaped citizenship policy for the first 175 years of our republic's history.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Of the 300,000 Chinese who immigrated to the United States, approximately 150,000 returned to China. The government limited Japanese immigration through the Gentlemen's Agreement of 1907, in which Theodore Roosevelt prevailed upon the Japanese government to prevent Japanese male laborers from immigrating to the United States; in return, Roosevelt pressured the San Francisco Board of Education to stop excluding Japanese children from the city's public schools. The Immigration Act of 1917 barred immigrants from India, Siam, Arabia, Indo-China, the Malay Peninsula, Afghanistan, New Guinea, Borneo, Java, Ceylon, Sumatra, Celebes, and parts of Russian Turkestan and Siberia. Sidney L. Gulick, *American Democracy and Asiatic Citizenship* (New York, 1918), 33; Milton R. Konvitz, *The Alien and the Asiatic in American Law* (Ithaca, 1946), 22–28.

⁵⁹ Ian F. Haney Lopez, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York, 1996); Reed Ueda, *Postwar Immigrant America: A Social History* (Boston, 1994), 18–44; and Luella Gettys, *The Law of Citizenship in the United States* (Chicago, 1934).

The privileged position of Europeans appeared in Crèvecoeur's musings. When he asked his famous question, "What then is the American, this new man?" he did not commence his answer with the words quoted on the first page of this essay. He began: "He is either an European, or the descendant of an European, hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country." Crèvecoeur did not acknowledge that Africans and Indians might claim to be American or that they might have contributed to that "strange mixture of blood" that was creating a new race of men. The United States did not just happen to be a nation of European descendants; it wanted to be. And one way European immigrants became Americans was to insist on their cultural and racial superiority to those of darker skins.⁶⁰

Roger Daniels, Ronald T. Takaki, and Alexander Saxton raised these issues in their pioneering studies of reactions to Asian immigrants in the American West in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Building on their work, in 1991 David R. Roediger published a seminal study of how one group of European immigrants, the antebellum Irish, became white.⁶¹

Roediger was hardly the first to note the deep antagonism between Irish immigrants and blacks in the nineteenth century, but he explored that antagonism with more sophistication and subtlety than his predecessors. He noted the similarities between the Irish immigrants' and free blacks' experiences in northern antebellum cities. Both groups had been shaped by preindustrial cultures where the rhythms of work and play were often at odds with the time and work discipline enforced by America's industrializing order. Both concentrated in the lowliest and most back-breaking occupations; both suffered discrimination at the hands of native-born Protestant whites. A labor historian by training, Roediger wanted to understand why the Irish turned on blacks, a fellow group of wage laborers, instead of making common cause with them.

Roediger began with the low status of wage labor in the new American nation. Wage labor was widely despised not just because it yielded a paltry income but also because it made the worker dependent on his employer, violating the American Revolution's ideal of independent and free citizens. Wage dependency also conjured up images of slavery, the American institution that had sealed the association of servility with dark skin. The Irish feared that they might be seen as black. This was no fantasy. The nativist press of the era frequently depicted the Irish as monkeys, an image also used to infantilize and dehumanize African Americans.⁶²

⁶⁰ Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, 43. In this volume, Crèvecoeur wrote a good deal about the Indians he encountered in his travels through Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard and the black slaves he observed in South Carolina. The decline of the Indian population and civilization in New England troubled him, and chattel slavery, especially as it was practiced in the southern states, appalled him. But even as he recognized the humanity of Indians and Africans, he could not envision them as Americans. *Ibid.*, esp. 102-9, 160-73.

⁶¹ Roger Daniels, *The Politics of Prejudice: The Anti-Japanese Movement in California and the Struggle for Japanese Exclusion* (Berkeley, 1962); Ronald T. Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1979); Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley, 1971). See also Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (London, 1990); and Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981). Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*.

⁶² Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 65-92.



IRISH EMIGRANT.

Patrick, (just landing.) "BY MY SOWL, YOU'RE BLACK, OLD FELLOW! HOW LONG HAVE YE BIN HERE?"
Nigger, (imitating the brogue.) "JIST THREE MONTHS, MY HONEY!"
Pat. "BY THE POWERS, I'LL GO BACK TO TIPPERARY IN A JIFFY! I'D NOT BE SO BLACK AS THAT FUR ALL THE WHISKEY IN ROSCREA!"

Becoming White

This 1852 cartoon pokes fun at the Irish fear that their journey to America would turn them black. Most sought to escape this "nightmarish" possibility, not by returning to Ireland, but by "becoming white."
Reproduced from Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York, 1995), 33.

To remove this black stain on their reputation, the Irish claimed their whiteness conferred on them a security against falling to the level of the African American. Drawing on the words of W. E. B. Du Bois, Roediger argued that whiteness brought the impoverished Irish a "public and psychological wage." Nineteenth-century white workers, Du Bois had written in 1935,

were given public deference . . . because they were white. They were admitted freely, with all classes of white people, to public functions. . . . The police were

drawn from their ranks. . . . Their votes selected public officials and while this had small effect upon the economic situation, it had great effect on their personal treatment.⁶³

Becoming "white" helped the Irish gain public respect and offered them a psychological escape from their menial status.

But the Irish could not dissociate themselves from black life altogether, for they were profoundly attracted to African American culture. In that culture's alleged simplicity, playfulness, and sensuality, Roediger provocatively argued, the Irish discerned a naturalness and wholesomeness that reminded them of the preindustrial culture that was slipping away from them. The Irish could never directly acknowledge their attraction to black culture, for that would drag them down to the African American level. But they acknowledged it indirectly by "becoming black" through blackface minstrel routines, the most popular entertainment of the urban working class. The more the Irish distanced themselves from "loathsome" blacks in "real life," the safer they felt in exploring on stage their attraction to black culture.⁶⁴

Roediger focused on the same downtrodden Irishmen that Handlin had portrayed fifty years earlier in *Boston's Immigrants*. But the ethnic group's identity was fashioned, not by its bruising contact with Boston's Protestant Brahmin elite, but by its complex relationship to America's poorest population. While Handlin had emphasized the incompleteness of assimilation, Roediger seemed to suggest that the Irish had fully absorbed the whiteness cherished in American society.

Roediger and other scholars suggest that questions of race figured prominently in the Americanization of new immigrants. In the twentieth century, eastern and southern Europeans found themselves in much the same predicament as the Irish had earlier. Concentrated in the worst industrial jobs, they were often considered racially inferior to "Anglo-Saxon" Americans. Although the courts regarded these European immigrants as white and thus eligible for citizenship, congressmen, scientists, reformers, nativists, and others repeatedly challenged their racial fitness and their ability to function as Americans. Racial considerations justified the drastic limitations on the number of southern and eastern European immigrants allowed to enter the United States under the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924. Thus the new immigrants and their children had to claw their way into the white race much as the Irish did a century before them.

That story has yet to be told. Matthew Frye Jacobson has argued that America's turn-of-the-century imperial adventures in the Philippines offered eastern European immigrants their first opportunity to join America's great Anglo-Saxon race and to participate vicariously in subduing and uplifting Asia's dark, savage races. Roediger and James Barrett, following Robert Orsi (who followed John Higham), have labeled the new immigrants the "inbetween peoples" to denote their indeterminate racial status—sometimes white, sometimes not—between 1900 and 1940.

⁶³ Quoted in Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 12.

⁶⁴ On the psychodynamics of minstrelsy, see Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York, 1993).

And Richard D. Alba, Arnold R. Hirsch, and I have interpreted the 1940s as the first decade in which the new immigrants and their descendants could lay a secure claim to whiteness.⁶⁵ Meanwhile, blackface—in vaudeville and in movies of the 1910s and 1920s—permitted immigrants both to explore and to distance themselves from black culture. Michael Rogin and Richard Slotkin have demonstrated how movies promoted ethnic assimilation even while they reinforced the racial division of white from black.⁶⁶

While the accounts differed on how inventive immigrants were in creating American identities, all agreed that race constrained invention. The tension between inventiveness and constraint is particularly acute in Michael Rogin's *Blackface, White Noise*, on movie making, race, and immigrant Americanization. Rogin recognized that the cinema gave its ethnic—especially Jewish—producers, directors, and actors opportunities to represent themselves in a variety of roles and masks and thus to negotiate the terms of their entry into American society. Blackface, in his eyes, was a particularly powerful form of cross-dressing, a behavior currently celebrated by postmodernists as a way for subalterns—women, gay men, people of color—to challenge the power of the imperial white, heterosexual man. But Rogin insisted that white men who put on "burnt cork" crossed the racial boundary only to reaffirm it. Even the makers of the progressive race films of the 1940s who were sickened by blackface and embraced racial equality conveyed a belief in the superiority of whites over blacks.⁶⁷

For Roediger, Rogin, and others in their camp, efforts to free American national

⁶⁵ Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Special Sorrows: The Diasporic Imagination of Irish, Polish, and Jewish Immigrants in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), 181–216; James Barrett and David Roediger, "Inbetween Peoples: Race, Nationality, and the New Immigrant Working Class," 1995 (in Gerstle's possession). See also David R. Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working Class History* (London, 1994), 181–99; Robert Orsi, "The Religious Boundaries of an Inbetween People: Street Feste and the Problem of the Dark-Skinned 'Other' in Italian Harlem, 1920–1990," *American Quarterly*, 44 (Sept. 1992), 313–47; and Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, 169. Richard D. Alba, *Ethnic Identity: The Transformation of White America* (New Haven, 1990); Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940–1960* (New York, 1983); Gary Gerstle, "The Working Class Goes to War," in *The War in American Culture: Society and Consciousness during World War II*, ed. Lewis A. Erenberg and Susan E. Hirsch (Chicago, 1996), 105–27; Gary Gerstle, "Race and the Myth of the Liberal Consensus," *Journal of American History*, 82 (Sept. 1995), 579–86. See also Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (London, 1995); George Lipsitz, "The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: Racialized Democracy and the 'White' Problem in American Studies," *American Quarterly*, 47 (Sept. 1995), 369–87; George J. Sánchez, "Reading Reginald Denny: The Politics of Whiteness in the Late Twentieth Century," *ibid.*, 388–94; Henry Louis Taylor Jr., "The Hidden Face of Racism," *ibid.*, 395–408; Walter E. Williams, "A Tragic Vision of Black Problems," *ibid.*, 409–15; George Lipsitz, "Toxic Racism," *ibid.*, 416–27; Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Becoming Caucasian: Vicissitudes of Whiteness in American Political Culture* (forthcoming, Harvard University Press); Karen Brodtkin Sacks, "How Did Jews Become White Folks?" in *Race*, ed. Steven Gregory and Roger Sanjek (New Brunswick, 1994); Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis, 1993); Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, vol. 1: *Racial Oppression and Social Control* (New York, 1994); and Bruce Nelson, "Class, Race, and Democracy in the CIO: The 'New' Labor History Meets the 'Wages of Whiteness,'" *International Review of Social History*, 41 (Dec. 1996), 351–74.

⁶⁶ Michael Rogin, "Blackface, White Noise: The Jewish Jazz Singer Finds His Voice," *Critical Inquiry*, 18 (Spring 1992), 417–53; Michael Rogin, "Democracy and Burnt Cork: The End of Blackface, the Beginning of Civil Rights," *Representations*, 46 (Spring 1994), 1–34; Michael Rogin, "Making America Home: Racial Masquerade and Ethnic Assimilation in the Transition to Talking Pictures," *Journal of American History*, 79 (Dec. 1992), 1050–75; Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York, 1993).

⁶⁷ Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise*.

identity from its affiliation with whiteness have failed. They wish that the nation would turn all its energies toward the "abolition of whiteness," but they doubt this will soon occur. Race, even more than class and gender, still limits the options of those who seek to become American.

Their pessimism, however, has not gone unchallenged. Other scholars and journalists discern an opportunity to reconfigure American identity along non-racialist lines. They point to the diminishing role of black-white relations as the lightning rod of urban politics, to the clamor for a multiracial category on the United States census, to the rising rates of racial intermarriage and the resulting hybridization of "American stock."⁶⁸ The American studies scholar Shelley Fisher Fishkin has argued that recent work on "the interrelatedness of blackness and whiteness" will make it increasingly difficult for white racists or black nationalists to deny that Americans of all races have constantly been peering at each other, copying and learning from each other, and thereby creating an "incontestably mulatto" American culture. The historian Gary Nash has asserted that the racial mixing of whites, Indians, blacks, Mexicans, and Asians has always been central to the American experience. And in his lucid book, *Postethnic America*, David Hollinger has laid out a compelling vision of the United States as a nonracialist, democratic society in which individuals would be free to embrace or to ignore the ethnoracial identities they inherit and to create new ones of their own. Hollinger both affirms diversity as a defining characteristic of the American experience and rejects the essentialist position, embraced by many multiculturalists, that a person must identify with the ethnoracial culture of his or her ancestors.⁶⁹

Hollinger's vision, with its emphasis on the freedom of Americans to choose their identities and to create new races, recalls that of Werner Sollors. This resemblance is hardly accidental: Hollinger praises Sollors's book as the most important work on pluralism and American identity of the last twenty-five years. Hollinger titled his book *Postethnic America* to echo Sollors's *Beyond Ethnicity*. Thus it is not surprising that Hollinger's work, like that of Sollors, suffers from inattention to social and historical constraints. First, it underestimates the commanding and resilient power of "whiteness." The category has survived by stretching its boundaries to include Americans—the Irish, eastern and southern Europeans—who had been deemed nonwhite. Contemporary evidence suggests that the boundaries are

⁶⁸ The metamorphosis of the pop singer Michael Jackson from "black" to "white" and his witty play on racial identity in his music video "Black or White" may come to be seen as a symbol of our age. Jim Sleeper, "The End of the Rainbow," *New Republic*, Nov. 1, 1993, pp. 20–25; "The New Face of America," special issue, *Time*, 142 (Fall 1993); Tom Morganthau, "What Color Is Black?," *Newsweek*, Feb. 13, 1995, pp. 63–65; Sharon Begley, "Three Is Not Enough," *ibid.*, pp. 67–69; Ellis Cose, "One Drop of Bloody History," *ibid.*, pp. 70–71; *Chicago Tribune*, Feb. 14, 1996, sec. 1, p. 8; Jim Sleeper, "Toward an End of Blackness: An Argument for the Surrender of Race Consciousness," *Harper's Magazine*, 291 (May 1997), 35–44.

⁶⁹ Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "Interrogating 'Whiteness,' Complicating 'Blackness': Remapping American Culture," *American Quarterly*, 47 (Sept. 1995), 428–66, esp. 428. The phrase "interrelatedness of blackness and whiteness" is Ralph Ellison's; the phrase "incontestably mulatto" is Albert Murray's. Gary Nash constructs a new pantheon of American heroes, white men—John Rolfe, William Byrd, Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson, Sam Houston—who loved or married across the color line. The Founding Fathers must be turning over in their graves. See Gary Nash, "The Hidden History of Mestizo America," *Journal of American History*, 82 (Dec. 1995), 941–64. Hollinger, *Postethnic America*.

again being stretched as Latinos and Asians pursue whiteness much as the Irish, Italians, and Poles did before them. Asians and Latinos, for example, are marrying "white" Americans at a far greater rate than are African Americans, thus enhancing the ability of their offspring to claim whiteness or "nonblackness." The offspring of black immigrants from the Caribbean, meanwhile, are assimilating into urban African American culture, a racialized process that their parents and their immigrant communities do not control.⁷⁰

Hollinger is more sensitive to the influence of class on culture than Sollors. Worried that the class disparity between white and black America might frustrate hopes for a postethnic nation, he calls for a liberal American nationalism that would nurture political movements able to tame capitalist power, promote the interests of the black poor, and bring them into a humane, diverse American community. He boldly—and accurately—asserts that Progressivism, the New Deal, the civil rights movement, and the Great Society were nationalist movements that derived legitimacy from their claim to speak "on behalf of the American nation" as a whole. He argues that resuscitating a humane, civic version of our nationalism, grounded in the ideals of liberty, equality, and democracy, would buoy the prospects for social reform without extinguishing cultural diversity. "The national community's fate," he writes, "can be common without its will being uniform, and the nation can constitute a common project without effacing all of the various projects that its citizens pursue through their voluntary associations."⁷¹

Hollinger's intriguing analysis downplays the nasty work that building a national community entails. Even where the civic elements of nationalism are exceptionally strong, as in our own society, nationalism demands that boundaries against outsiders be drawn, that a dominant national culture be created or reinvigorated, and that internal and external opponents of the national project be subdued, nationalized, vanquished, and even excluded or expelled. If one argues, as Hollinger does, that the United States made great civic and social-democratic strides during its 1930–1960 nationalist heyday, one must also recognize how much the liberty and equality of that era were made possible by the coercion of the 1910s and 1920s. The Progressive nation builders enacted or acquiesced to measures meant to subdue certain groups and to exclude other groups. Woodrow Wilson sanctioned the subordination of blacks by permitting his cabinet members to resegregate their government departments. During World War I, government-endorsed campaigns for

⁷⁰ Hollinger, *Postethnic America*, 187–88; Paul R. Spickard, *Mixed Blood: Intermarriage and Ethnic Identity in Twentieth Century America* (Madison, 1989); Maria P. P. Root, *Racially Mixed People in America* (Newbury Park, 1992); Sharon Lee and Keiko Yamanaka, "Patterns of Asian American Intermarriage and Marital Assimilation," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 21 (Summer 1990), 287–305; Barry Edmonston, Sharon Lee, and Jeffrey Passell, "U.S. Population Projections for National Group Origins: Taking into Account Ethnicity and Exogamy," in *Proceedings of the American Statistical Association, Social Statistics Section* (Washington, 1994), 100–105; Mary C. Waters, "Ethnic and Racial Identities of Second-Generation Black Immigrants in New York City," *International Migration Review*, 28 (Winter 1994), 795–820; Matthijs Kalmijn, "Trends in Black/White Intermarriage," *Social Forces*, 72 (Sept. 1993), 119–46. George Sánchez has borrowed and cleverly adapted an interpretive framework conceived by scholars of European ethnicity; in pulling the Chicano experience closer to that of Europeans, he may also have widened the distance separating it from that of African Americans. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American*.

⁷¹ Hollinger, *Postethnic America*, 131–72, esp. 148, 157, 165–68.

"one-hundred-percent Americanism" almost destroyed German Americans as a viable ethnic group and undermined other experiments in cultural pluralism. Campaigns against socialists and syndicalists, who were charged with being un-American and thus beyond the protection of the national community's laws, weakened American radicalism. Congress barred virtually all immigration from East and South Asia; after the war the Supreme Court ruled that a 1790 law made all East and South Asian immigrants ineligible for American citizenship. In 1924 Congress concocted an immigration restriction system to bar Europeans who were deemed racially inferior and politically suspect. America had shrunk its circle of the "we" and had substantially narrowed the range of acceptable cultural and political behavior.⁷²

These repressive measures did strengthen the national community after a period of massive immigration and deep cultural diversity. And fortifying the nation, once liberals came to power in the 1930s, did reinvent the American commitment to democratic principles and encouraged southern and eastern Europeans and then blacks, Latinos, and Asians to claim their rights to life, liberty, and economic opportunity. But the success of this liberal nationalist project, I would argue, depended on the earlier deployment of the coercive power of the state against Germans, new immigrants, Asians, and political radicals. Liberal progress, in this instance, profited from the earlier period of repression and exclusion.

Today, we might consider California's Proposition 187, the new federal law that denies government benefits to noncitizens, the new immigration law stripping illegal aliens of certain rights, the "English Only" movement, the growing clamor for immigration restriction, and attacks on multiculturalism as measures similar to those favored by the Progressive Era nation builders.⁷³ They aim to exclude certain foreigners and to demand that foreigners already in our midst conform to "American" values and behavior. However much liberal nation builders such as Hollinger may deplore such political developments, they should recognize how important the developments may be to bolstering the nation and thus to creating a political environment in which several nationalisms, including the liberal variety, will flourish.

If Hollinger fails to treat the national community as a structure of power that

⁷² As part of my project on American nationalism and multiculturalism, I am writing an account of the coercive measures undertaken by the American state, 1910-1930, to reconstitute the American nation. For partial accounts, see Higham, *Strangers in the Land*; Lopez, *White by Law*; O'Leary, "Americans All?"; Nancy Weiss, "The Negro and the New Freedom: Fighting Wilsonian Segregation," *Political Science Quarterly*, 84 (March 1969), 61-79; Dewey W. Grantham Jr., "The Progressive Movement and the Negro," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 54 (Oct. 1955), 461-77; Yuji Ichioka, *The Issei: The World of the First Generation Japanese Immigrants, 1885-1924* (New York, 1988); Luebke, *Bonds of Loyalty*; H. C. Peterson and Gilbert C. Fite, *Opponents of War, 1917-1918* (Madison, 1957); James Weinstein, *The Decline of Socialism in America: 1912-1925* (1967; New Brunswick, 1984); and Carlson, *Quest for Conformity*. Hollinger understands that nations work best when they possess enough state apparatus to provide, in the words of Michael Ignatieff, "security and civility for their citizens." But he says little about how such an apparatus endows a nation—or those in charge of the state apparatus—with the power to determine who would be admitted and who would be kept out, which groups would be subjected to cultural or political discipline and which would be allowed to be free. See Hollinger, *Postethnic America*, 144; and Michael Ignatieff, *Blood and Belonging: Journeys into the New Nationalism* (New York, 1993), 13.

⁷³ Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, 110 Stat. 2105 (1996); Omnibus Consolidated Appropriations Act, 1997, 110 Stat. 3009 (1996).

circumscribes choice and shapes the identities to which individuals and groups can aspire, his work nevertheless points toward a fuller understanding of nationalism's role in shaping Americanization. Historians have yet to take full measure of the powerful nationalism that settled over America in the 1910s and 1920s, suffocating the hyphenated identities that had thrived in the beginning of the century.⁷⁴ Historians must examine how the institutions of civil society—corporations, labor unions, universities, the mass media, churches and synagogues, and schools—weakens the pluralist character of pre-1917 America and accelerated national integration.⁷⁵ They must also explore the work of nationalism in politics, through Americanization programs, the disciplining of behaviors and peoples deemed un-American, mobilization for war, and patriotic rhetoric promising the poor and downtrodden social and economic equality. Only through such studies will we understand the mixture of opportunity and coercion that transformed eastern and southern European immigrants from reluctant Americans into American patriots and impelled their descendants to reinvent them as archetypal Crèvecoeurian men and women who, in alleged contrast to today's immigrants, quickly tossed off their heritages and became the best and most devoted of Americans.

Most scholars regard the Crèvecoeurian myth as a poor guide to history. Few would argue that European immigrants quickly became American, that they found no significant obstacles thrown in their path, or that they enthusiastically melded themselves into a single unvarying race or culture. The rich literature produced between 1920 and 1970 has rendered each of these Crèvecoeurian claims untenable. But it would be a mistake to pronounce Crèvecoeur dead, for his last claim, that Americanization was, at bottom, an emancipation from Old World constraints, has enjoyed a remarkable renaissance.

The enduring power of the Crèvecoeur myth may lie in its ability to merge with the Enlightenment ideal of freedom central to this country's identity. That ideal blesses the desire to throw off inherited customs and beliefs and to begin anew; a fresh start would put individual and social perfection within human grasp. In the eighteenth century, that ideal became associated with revolution and nation building. Both the American and the French revolutionaries saw themselves as breaking sharply with the past and establishing new societies of new men. Hence, Crèvecoeur's vision of immigrants forming a new race meshed with the Founding Fathers' vision of launching a new nation. The two visions are two versions of the

⁷⁴ Some new works point us in the right direction, in effect elaborating on the suggestion of John Higham and Oscar Handlin fifty years ago that the early twentieth century, the 1920s in particular, was a pivotal moment when the forces of social control and conformity gained an edge over those of pluralism and individualism. See Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York, 1993); John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, 1992); Handlin, *Uprooted*; Higham, *Strangers in the Land*; John Higham, "Integrating America: The Problem of Assimilation in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 1 (Fall 1981), 7-25. See also the stimulating essays in Bodnar, ed., *Bonds of Affection*.

⁷⁵ For a preliminary, though suggestive, study, see Morris Janowitz, *The Reconstruction of Patriotism: Education for Civic Consciousness* (Chicago, 1983).

Enlightenment call for human emancipation. And at the level of mythology, emancipation—from kings, lords, tyrants, slavery, caste, tribes, superstition, poverty, patriarchy, even heterosexuality—is the very essence of “America.”

No account of immigrant Americanization should neglect the drive to be free of the past, to reinvent one’s identity, or to reinvigorate old identities. For many immigrants, America has held out the promise of a freedom greater than any they had known before. But, as I have tried to show, becoming American cannot be understood in “emancipationist” terms alone, for immigrants invariably encountered structures of class, race, gender, and national power that constrained, and sometimes defeated, their efforts to be free. Coercion, as much as liberty, has been intrinsic to our history and to the process of becoming American.