

Becoming American: Immigration and Assimilation in Late 19th Century America

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Part 1: What cultural changes traced to immigration?

Let's take 1924 as a starting point, because that year marks the end of the second great immigration that stretched from 1820 to the Great Depression. Even though the first American immigration, which ran from the 1680s to the Revolution, was enormous by eighteenth-century standards, the second immigration dwarfed it. The primary source of movement was a demographic revolution that doubled Europe's population. Beginning in the 1820s, instead of swinging out year after year to work and return, work and return, ever-larger numbers just kept going. Millions of villagers remade themselves into city dwellers in Vienna or Moscow. Others, about 65 million of them between 1820 and 1921, crossed the Atlantic. At the peaks of migration between 1870 and 1914, the effect was one of a churning of people back and forth across the Atlantic.

In broad terms, the new migration followed in the wake of a boom in population that rumbled from the British Isles eastward into the Germanic center of the continent, swung north into Scandinavia and south into the Italian peninsula, then doubled back into pockets of Western and Central Europe that it had missed, and finally swept across Eastern Europe from the far tip of the Baltic Sea through the Balkans. What mattered were not the soaring populations themselves but the migrations they triggered. From Ireland, spurred both by a search for work and the collapse of the Great Famine, an enormous outpouring emptied whole villages and towns. In Norway, the birthrate rose sharply around mid-century, and as those children were reaching adulthood, a half-century of heavy emigration commenced. The bulge struck Italy first in the north, where the movement originated, then in stages down the boot, with migration picking up a rapid pace. Doubling back, pressures in rural Wales sent waves of migrants into the English and American labor pools during the 1860s and 1870s. Then between the 1880s and the First World War, exploding populations blanketed the European domains of the Austrian-Hungarian, Russian, and the Ottoman Empires and ignited great outmigrations that supplied nearly three of every four newcomers to America.

These swirling movements washed endlessly over the United States. Around 1907, just as 1.5 million newcomers arrived, the greatest one-year total ever, Edward Steiner, a Jewish immigrant from western Russia, began to publish a series of books: *On the Trail of the Immigrant* (1906), *The Immigrant Tide* (1909), *The Broken Wall* (1911), *From Alien to Citizen* (1914), and *Nationalizing America* (1916), all evocative of this young immigrant's tramping through eastern and southern Europe, wandering into the great cities of the northeast, following immigrants into Pittsburgh's great steel mills, watching the building of churches and synagogues, observing the birth of new nationalisms among immigrant peoples, seeing immigrants' powerful push into politics; and envisioning the amalgamation of diverse people. Like Tom Paine a century and a quarter earlier, Steiner put freedom and mobility at the heart of the story of the United States, a theme of pluralism that found great resonance among the immigrants and their children. For now they were mobilizing great collective movements to make decent homes and neighborhoods, to demand humane working conditions and wages, to use political parties to change America.

Yet their drive met enormous resistance. Beginning in the 1880s and 1890s, an anti-immigrant, nativist movement gathered force. After first attacking immigrant Catholicism, the nativists moved on to confront immigrant radicals. Then, in the early twentieth century, American elites

formulated a new theory of race that defined eastern and southern European immigrants as eternal outsiders. Seething with resentment over their loss of power and animated by their fear of the conflict that followed immigrant mobilizations, they fashioned an appeal to rural and middle-class Anglo-Americans that persuaded them to shut the gates. In the same years that Steiner was putting forth his optimistic account of the blending of immigrants and natives, Madison Grant, a denizen of Park Avenue and a trustee of the New York Zoological Society, published his immensely influential diatribe on immigration's threat to the American people. *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916), he called it, a warning that the "Nordic race" was making its last stand in North America against the inferior hordes pouring in from eastern and southern Europe. A mounting sense of danger and displacement spurred Anglo-Americans to action, first in the prohibition movement between 1907 and 1918, next in the relentless drive for unity against Germany in 1917 and 1918, and finally in the triumphant campaign to shut down immigration in 1924.

As an illustrative encounter, let's consider a clash in 1915 between Edward Ross, a renowned Midwestern sociologist, and Horace Kallen, a New York public intellectual. Their famous spat dramatically highlights the stark differences between two positions. One camp mourned the loss of Anglo-American dominance in the old republic; Ross's *Old World in the New* served as the manifesto for these nativists. The other side looked toward a new nation of side-by-side ethnic groups; Horace Kallen's famous response to Ross, "Democracy versus the Melting Pot," rallied the pluralists. Immigration gave rise to this cultural contest, the consequences of which are still unfolding in twenty-first century America.

Document 1: A manifesto to preserve Anglo-America: Edward A. Ross, *The Old World in the New; The Significance of Past and Present Immigration to the American People* (New York: The Century Company, 1914), pp. 282-287.

Document 2: A plea for pluralism: Horace A. Kallen, "Democracy versus the Melting Pot," *The Nation*, vol. 100 (February 25, 1915), pp. 217-218.