

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

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Part 4: How, in the midst of such uncertainty, did immigrants create a distinctive urban culture?

Immigrants invented new cultures that at once drew ethnic boundaries and bridged differences. On the one hand, immigrants contributed enormously to the religious diversity of American cities. As late as the 1880s, Protestant institutions and elites dominated New York, Chicago, and San Francisco. A mere three decades later, immigrant Catholic, Jewish, and Orthodox places of worship, schools, hospitals, orphanages, and welfare agencies furnished the indispensable supports of urban, working-class life. In the meantime, immigrant newspapers in Polish, Yiddish, Italian, Lithuanian, and fifty other languages multiplied endlessly, in Pennsylvania mining towns, in great cities, in every place where newcomers settled. In small and big cities alike, ethnic theater companies sprang up, performing in every sort of space -- saloons, coffee shops, church assembly rooms, mutual benefit halls, even street corners.

On the other hand, even as ethnic leaders made these ways of assuring loyalties, immigrant entrepreneurs learned to take advantage of new media to breach boundaries. Many of the earliest movie theaters in major American cities -- Chicago and St. Louis, for example -- resulted from the efforts of immigrant businesses to reach beyond their own groups. Soon, too, journalists who got their start in foreign-language newspapers broke into English-language dailies, where they pioneered crime reporting, sports writing, and advice columns. In new technologies such as radio, immigrants took the lead: newcomers established urban stations and national radio networks in the 1920s. Whatever shape the need for communications in this strange, new urban world took, immigrants responded, whether with the small, intimate ethnic theater, or the great, blaring movie palace.

How did immigrants manage both to cultivate the distinctive identities of ethnic groups and establish the common connections among urban masses? For one thing, immigrants had the realtors' advantage: location. Recall that the great mass of immigrants gravitated toward the cities, even as the bulk of Anglo-Americans remained in small towns and the countryside. For another, newcomers *had* to communicate across boundaries, since their survival depended on it. In polyglot cities, immigrants' command of both their native languages and English was an enormous advantage. Whether worker or shopkeeper, immigrants quickly acquired English through individual study in the thousands of language-learning handbooks published in more than 50 languages and in numberless evening and weekend language classes. We can get some glimpses of the payoff for their efforts in a major strike in Chicago's packinghouses in 1904. Given that the typical packing shed housed a workforce drawn from 20 or 30 different ethnic groups, union leaders had to speak, in English, an idiom of rational toleration in order to succeed. They had to welcome all comers, as in this account of early union growth by a Hungarian butcher: "The night I joined the Cattle Butchers' Union I was led into the room by a black member. With me were Czechs, Germans, Poles, Lithuanians, Ukrainians, and Mexicans, and Mike Donnelly, the President, an Irishman. We swore to be loyal to our union above everything else except the country, the city, and the state." And, for yet a third thing, immigrant editors, entrepreneurs, actors -- the whole range of the new agents of urban creativity -- nurtured a burning ambition to occupy the cultural stage and play major roles in the making of a new American culture.

Much of the documentation of immigrant cultural creativity is elusive. But a few telling traces run through readily available sources. In connection with religious diversity, sample a few passages

from *Hull House Maps and Papers*, a compilation of first-hand investigations that reveals the immigrant worlds around Chicago's famous settlement house. For a glimpse of the density of the immigrant press, read two short selections, the first from Peter Roberts's study of immigrant mining communities, the second from the great University of Chicago sociologist Robert's Park's analysis of foreign-language newspapers. For an astonishing insight into ethnic theater, consult Hutchins Hapgood's classic account of the Jewish immigrant world of New York's Lower East Side, a product of this Massachusetts Brahmin-gone-Bohemian's long residence in Greenwich Village. And Peter Roberts also supplies, in his sweeping account of the so-called "new immigration," a snippet on immigrants' acquisition of English. The quotation above from the Hungarian butcher is my translation of a passage in Géza Hoffman, *Csonka munkásosztály. Az amerikai magyarság* [A Fragmented Working Class: The Hungarians in America] (Budapest: Magyar Közgazdasági Társaság, 1911), p. 132.

Document 12: Religious diversity in the immigrant city: Josefa Humpal Zeman, "The Bohemian People in Chicago," *Hull House Maps and Papers* (New York: T. Y. Crowell, [1895]), pp. 122-125.

Document 13: What did immigrants read? Peter Roberts, *Anthracite Coal Communities* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1904), pp. 188-189.

Document 14: A massive immigrant press: Robert Park, *The Immigrant Press and Its Control* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1922), pp. 6-9.

Document 15: Immigrant theater and city life: Hutchins Hapgood, *The Spirit of the Ghetto: Studies of the Jewish Quarter in New York* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1902), 113-116.

Document 16: Learning English, preserving native languages: Peter Roberts, *The New Immigration* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1912), pp. 289-290.