

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

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Part 5: How did immigrants transform American politics?

From village to factory was one long road. Along the way, not only did immigrants create a work force, not only did they make possible a second industrial revolution, not only did they fashion a new urban culture, but they also mounted social movements that altered the distribution of power in the United States. A glance back into the nineteenth century finds immigrants intermittently engaged in social protest; a look forward reveals their rendezvous with the New Deal. Locating ourselves in the present shows that this second immigration made the United States more democratic than it would have been without those millions of newcomers. In the early twentieth century, many Anglo-Americans feared that immigrants were shattering the common culture on which democracy depends, in the same way that many of our own contemporaries fear the dissolution of shared values. Looking back, however, we can see that the recurrent clamor of the immigrants stretched and flexed existing institutions and that the very needs of the new immigrants gave their demands a progressive thrust.

How did this happen in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries? In recent years, historians have overturned much conventional wisdom and offered a new understanding. A blunt way to put the point is that ethnic allegiance and class consciousness converged, rising and falling together and eventually, in the 1930s, merging. An amalgam of class and ethnic feeling produced a new social formation for which historians still have no name. The best we can say is that this was the moment in the formation of ethnic and class coalitions that changed the balance of power.

In part, this intermingling of ethnicity and class -- this reduction of ethnic fragmentation, this making of a new coalition -- stemmed from the institutionalization of the labor movement. In some industries, the unionizing struggles of the early twentieth century forged a remarkable class solidarity among different ethnic groups. No one saw this more clearly than Peter Roberts, the pioneer scholar-activist whose work we've already considered. Roberts grasped that the immigrants formed unions that were more compact and unified than the ones that English and Irish and Welsh and Scots miners had created in the nineteenth century. And every close observer understood that the key was Polish and Slovak and Ukrainian and Slovene miners' passionate commitment to unions. After all, by 1910, they made up nearly 90% of the miners, and when they rose in strikes they poured out of their little cabins with enormous energy and determination. And they faced the coal companies not only as miners, but also as newly assertive members of ethnic groups. In short, these newcomers became self-consciously ethnic at the very moment of discovering a wider class solidarity.

But how did this newly aroused class consciousness blend with ethnic feeling? That's a theme that historians are just beginning to explore. To conclude our seminar, let's outline this new understanding and explore it in the rich photographic record of immigrant nationalisms.

By the outbreak of World War I, the rising ethnic consciousness of new immigrant communities was finding expression in vast class mobilizations. But these ethnic revivals also took the form of nationalist campaigns. In the nineteenth century, only the Irish had supported a broad movement for the liberation of their homeland. But beginning in early twentieth century and picking up momentum in World War I, movements to redeem the homeland spread through a dozen ethnic groups, each resonating to the others and all together awakening in immigrant peoples a level of collective expectation that was unprecedented. Great numbers of Poles,

Serbs, Czechs, Slovaks, Chinese, and Jews who were not yet U. S. citizens returned to Europe and Asia to fight for the nationalist cause. Except for German language publications, the immigrant press thrived on the war, and the number of foreign-language newspapers nearly doubled between 1914 and 1918. Nationalist heroes like Ignac Paderewski, the famed Polish pianist, and Tomas Masaryk, the exiled philosopher-statesman of the Czechs, toured American cities. In Washington, ethnic lobbying designed to influence the peace settlement became, for Jewish Zionists, Ukrainians, Yugoslavs, Italians, Greeks, Lithuanians, and others, a new style of politics.

So what was new about this politics? The short answer is that ethnicity and nationalism solved a big problem for people on the move: Where do I belong?. An answer to that question met an urgent need to locate newcomers in big, tumultuous, and unfamiliar cities. Ethnicity and nationalism also thrust once invisible immigrant groups, from recently arrived Jews to Poles to Jamaicans, into sudden visibility and gained them a new recognition in the crowded arenas of American life. Rallying opinion and raising funds for overseas projects produced countless public demonstrations, receptions for visiting representatives of the homeland, mass meetings to pass resolutions and secure pledges, musical festivals to display a cultural heritage, and, above all, parades. Soon after America's entry into World War I, government agencies worked to coordinate the ethnic campaigns in the interest of a unified war effort. That governmental attention led, in turn, to even greater visibility. To take one striking instance, when Liberty Loan officials in 1918 organized a monster Fourth of July Parade up Michigan Avenue in Chicago, the notion of demonstrating the loyalty and affinity of every immigrant group in America proved so popular that the original roster of 44 participating groups quickly expanded to 64. A ten-hour parade, numbering 109,415 marchers and 158 bands, included Native Americans, Haitians, Liberians, Japanese, Parsees, Russians, Rusins, Zionists, even Americans of German Origin.

Below is a series of six photographs that illustrate the astonishing flooding of immigrant labor and nationalist movements onto American streets in the early twentieth century. All record Chicago's great immigrant mobilizations, since the city's photojournalists left the best collections.

Image 1: Garment workers strike, women lining up for protest parade, Chicago, December 1910.

Image 2: Garment workers strike, men and women parading on West Jackson Boulevard, Chicago, December 1910.

Image 3: Garment workers strike, men and women parading on residential street, Chicago, December 1910.

Image 4: Crowd awaiting Zionist parade, Chicago, 1914.

Image 5: Polish National Alliance parade, Michigan Avenue, Chicago, 1918 (searching for on-line source).

Image 6: Third Liberty Loan parade, Art Institute visible in background, Chicago, July 1918.