

## **“The Americanization of Immigrants”**

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The United States is the most ethnically diverse nation in the world because of the millions of people who immigrated here from everywhere else. Since its beginnings as a nation, this country accepted newcomers with few restrictions. A huge rise in the numbers of immigrants began during the 1850s with the arrival of Irish Catholics fleeing the potato famine in Ireland and the Chinese in the West to work on the railroads. The large numbers of people with unfamiliar culture, religion, and language (many of the Irish spoke Gaelic, the native language of the Celts) turned the tide of American feeling against immigrants for the first time. By the turn of the twentieth century, Americans’ fears had risen to new heights with the arrival of more and more immigrants such as Italians and Poles from southern and eastern Europe. These immigrants had languages and cultural beliefs and practices that seemed even stranger to many Americans than those of the Irish.

The sheer numbers of new arrivals, combined with worries about political radicals, the economic recession of 1919, the loss of jobs due to it, and stereotypical views about race and culture, fueled old fears that immigrants posed a threat to American values and institutions. In the late nineteenth century, the theory of **Social Darwinism** became popular among Americans. It misapplied the idea of biological evolution to societies, placing different cultural groups on a linear ladder of evolution. English society was at the apex or top of the scale while all other groups (such as Irish and Italians) were below. It held that the most fit would survive and that no intervention could accelerate the pace of a slow steady social progression. Certain groups (such as the Irish, Italians and African Americans) were believed to have lower intelligence or even be less than human. Social Darwinism provided scientific evidence to justify a **laissez-faire** stance toward unfair labor practices and opposition to legislation to correct social ills.

Anti-immigrant and **nativistic** feelings in America propelled the passage of the first federal laws beginning in 1882 with the Chinese Exclusion Act restricting who could enter this country. With the passage of the Quota Act of 1921 and the Immigration Act of 1924, the open borders policy of the United States government came to an end. These laws gave preference to immigrants from northern and western Europe while those from southern and eastern Europe were severely restricted from entering. The 1924 Act reconfirmed barring individuals from the Far East altogether.

In an effort to stop a tide of immigrants that many Americans feared would totally erase the American way of life, both independent and government-sponsored groups began organized programs to aid and Americanize the immigrants. These

programs began around the turn of the twentieth century and reached a height after World War I. Before the war, the focus was on making the immigrants law-abiding citizens. Afterward, the by-word was loyalty but the real intention was to get immigrants to conform to the American way of life. Pressure on immigrants to **assimilate** was tremendous and extended to all areas of life including the workplace. Sometimes immigrants were required to take English classes as part of their job placement. Women were seen as the ones who would pass on American culture to their families, so organizations established classes to teach women American homemaking skills. For instance, cooking classes taught immigrant women how to cook American style and promoted certain vegetables as "American" while others were labeled "foreign"! Bilingual schools were looked down upon and non-English language programs were viewed as un-American. Programs for children included opportunities to play that taught them how to go grocery shopping, American games and music, and took them on outings.

The immigrants themselves often resented the organized efforts at Americanization. Their responses to the programs ranged from indifference to hostility. Italians in general avoided programs that promised handouts because they were distrustful of them. Such help had been uncommon in Italy. Italians relied on their families, relatives, and the mutual aid societies to help the needy.

At the same time, immigrants embraced certain aspects of American culture. For the most part, immigrants wanted to learn English which resulted in a shortage of English night classes. Immigrants also responded creatively to the challenges that they faced in America. They adopted certain American traditions, dropped some of their own, and combined others. A classic example of this blending of traditions is immigrants who celebrate the holidays of Thanksgiving or the Fourth of July by incorporating traditional American dishes as well as their own ethnic foods in the celebration.

By the 1930s through the 1950s, increasing concern about prejudices and tensions among immigrant groups gave rise to the theory of cultural pluralism. This idea promoted the view that diversity was good as long as it was not accompanied by prejudice of one group toward another. The metaphor of the salad bowl replaced the theory of the melting pot in which everyone was expected to assimilate. Many people believed that ethnic identity would disappear over time. This has not happened. We have seen how older immigrant groups as well as newer immigrants can still place great value on their own cultural traditions while at the same time embracing the United States as their adopted home.

*Note: Words in bold can be found in the Glossary for this lesson.*

**Sources used for this essay:**

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