

Immigrant Assimilation: Some Morals from American History¹

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Introduction

In the early 20th-century United States, “immigrant assimilation” often became an intense focus of public attention or concern. Assimilation in this context included a wide variety of socio-cultural attempts to integrate European newcomers into stably patriotic American citizenry. The so-called “hyphenated American” thus emerged as an allegedly serious obstacle to immigrant assimilation. “There is no room in this country for hyphenated Americanism,” addressed Theodore Roosevelt to his audience in 1915, “a hyphenated American is not an American at all...Americanism is a matter of the spirit and of the soul. Our allegiance must be purely to the United States. We must unsparingly condemn any man who holds any other allegiance.”²

Meanwhile, it was an undeniable fact to many contemporaries—especially those who were more or less conscious of their own immigrant background—that assimilation meant (at least somewhat) forced Americanization; their antipathy to the idea consequently grew all the stronger. “Americanization is an ugly word,” an Italian newspaper in Pennsylvania said in 1920. “Today it means to proselytize by making the foreign-born forget his mother country and mother tongue.”³ As already significant members of this diverse nation of immigrants, immigrant Americans openly condemned the then-popular cause of assimilation or Americanization as derogatory to them.

While I admit that their rooted objection to Americanization is entirely justifiable, the purpose of my paper is to present not only a somewhat revisionist opinion but also a rather affirmative analysis of immigrant assimilation. It was true that the idea of assimilation in the early 20th century accompanied some obvious defects. However, the past negative aspects of immigrant assimilation would not necessarily deny its positive legacy in history as well as its useful potentials for the present. If adequately executed, the efforts to assimilate newcomers could help consolidate in the public mind an ideological stronghold for effectively preventing anti-immigrant prejudice and discrimination.

In order to properly appreciate the positive impact of assimilation on post-WWII America’s political and socio-economic integrity, we should try to reevaluate the so-called “National Origins Formula” from the 1920s to the 60s. With strict immigration control, the years of the National Origins Formula constituted a notable period when turn-of-the-century European immigrants had successfully joined the full membership of the American mainstream. While the negative impact of immigration regulation would

undoubtedly deserve critical examinations, I intend in the following to present what I would consider a balanced view of immigrant assimilation.

Assimilation as a Political Concept

The term “assimilation” is often used to describe a condition or situation where immigrant newcomers adjust to the culture of a host society and eventually reach the point of accepting it as their own. Assimilation in this sense is another word for what cultural anthropologists call “acculturation.”⁴ Meanwhile, the kind of immigrant assimilation that I support here is what the American sociologist Robert Park calls “political” assimilation, which has some deeper implications than acculturation. The pioneer of assimilation studies in the United States, Park says in 1930:

Assimilation...is a political rather than a cultural concept. It is the name given to the process or processes by which peoples of diverse racial origins and different cultural heritages, occupying a common territory, achieve a cultural solidarity sufficient at least to sustain a national existence...In the United States an immigrant is ordinarily considered assimilated as soon as he has acquired the language and the social ritual of the native community and can participate, without encountering prejudice, in the common life, economic and political. The common sense view of the matter is that an immigrant is assimilated as soon as he has shown that he can “get on in the country.” This implies among other things that in all the ordinary affairs of life he is able to find a place in the community on the basis of his individual merits without invidious or qualifying reference to his racial origin or to his cultural inheritance.⁵

The Parkian sense of assimilation may be called “integration” today; it has an emphasis on political and socio-economic parity between newcomers and existing residents. What I endorse here as an ideal type of assimilation is the integration of immigrant newcomers into the “national existence.”⁶

Structural Assimilation⁷

The type of political assimilation summarized above would be better understood in comparison to Milton Gordon’s theory of immigrant assimilation. In *Assimilation in American Life* (1964), Gordon divides assimilation into several crucial stages, of which he sees “structural assimilation” most important. As “the keystone of the arch” of the whole assimilation process, structural assimilation causes and promotes the further series of assimilation. “Once structural assimilation has occurred...all of the other types of assimilation will naturally follow,” says Gordon.

According to Gordon, structural assimilation represents a situation where immigrants have achieved a

“large-scale entrance into cliques, clubs, and institutions of host society, on primary group level.” Through structural assimilation, immigrant newcomers would go beyond mere acculturation up to the point of acquiring a progressively solid foothold for the full membership of a host society. Put this way, Gordon’s theory of assimilation aims to elaborate the everyday life sphere of Park’s political model.

Gordon goes on to stress the importance of intermarriage or “marital assimilation, an inevitable by-product of structural assimilation” through which immigrant newcomers would gradually dissipate their ethnic identities into a host society. “Prejudice and discrimination are no longer a problem” at this stage of assimilation, he says, “since eventually the descendants of the original minority group become indistinguishable, and since primary group relationships tend to build up an ‘in-group’ feeling which encloses all the members of the group.”

Marital assimilation thus constitutes an essential part of structural assimilation because the former would powerfully help integrate new immigrants into the socio-economic fabrics of the existing mainstream population. If assimilation has progressed in this direction and completed “in all intrinsic as well as extrinsic cultural traits,” it would bring about what Gordon calls “civic assimilation”—the final stage of assimilation where “no value conflicts on civic issues are likely to arise between the now-dispersed descendants of the ethnic minority and members of the core society.”⁸

Critiques of Structural Assimilation

Gordon’s theory has often been exposed to critical counter-arguments by other scholars of assimilation. Richard Alba and Victor Nee point out that Gordon has overlooked the importance of “occupational mobility and economic assimilation,” both of which they identify as “the key dimensions of socioeconomic assimilation.” According to Alba and Nee, these two elements are “of paramount significance...because parity of life chances with natives is a critical indicator of the decline of ethnic boundaries.” Once immigrant newcomers have managed to cross ethnic lines and enter “the occupational and economic mainstream,” what would drive them next is “undoubtedly...a motive for social (i.e., structural, in Gordon’s sense) assimilation.” Socioeconomic mobility would thus result in the supra-ethnic “equal status contact” in occupational and economic activities on a daily basis—a point essential but missing in Gordon’s model.⁹

Another critical look at Gordon’s model comes from Herbert Gans, who presents an alternative view of immigrant assimilation to Gordonian “straight-line theory.” Straight-line theory “looks at the American life of the immigrants and their children from the perspective of the Old-Country culture,” says Gans, “and measures the way, extent, and speed with which they give up that culture.” Straight-line theory thus “leaves out ‘agency’...i.e., the opportunity for people who have choices to make them.” Instead of straight-line theory, Gans goes on to propose “bumpy line theory” to accurately comprehend a wide variety of immigrant experiences. The “bumps” represent “various kinds of adaptations to changing circumstances—

and with the line having no predictable end.”¹⁰

Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou present another theoretical framework—“segmented assimilation”—to better address the complexities of immigrant assimilation. Through numerous case studies, they argue that assimilation should be understood neither as linear nor monolithic progress. “Instead of a relatively uniform mainstream whose mores and prejudices dictate a common path of integration,” they observe “several distinct forms of adaptation”—successful socio-cultural integration into the middle class, downfall into permanent poverty or the underclass, and economic advancement with simultaneous conservation of immigrant culture and solidarity networks. Recasting and segmenting immigrant assimilation in this way, Portes and Zhou conclude that “the question is into what sector of American society a particular immigrant group assimilates,” and “what makes some immigrant groups become susceptible to the downward route and what resources allow others to avoid this course.”¹¹

The National Origins Formula

Gordon’s structural assimilation has been criticized primarily because it is considered too simplistic to address the complexities of immigration problems and phenomena in 20th-century America. However, we should note that none of its critics has succeeded in replacing Gordon’s theory with their own; rather, their models have supplemented Gordon’s and helped increase its adequacy and scope. While structural assimilation may not be a perfectly accurate description of immigrant assimilation, it has exerted an enormous influence on assimilation studies; it still remains a comprehensive theoretical framework that is valid enough to explain the underlying reality of immigrant experiences in America.

In fact, America’s immigration restrictions from the early to mid-20th century played a dominant role in making structural assimilation a reality. In 1965, a year after Gordon’s groundbreaking book was first published, the United States finally abandoned the National Origins Formula, which had been in effect since the 1920s. The National Origins Formula was a product of post-WWI immigration in America. The years spanning from the 1890s to the mid-1920s marked America’s age of mass immigration. The great wave of (mostly European) immigrants beat upon the American shores; nearly 4,700,000 immigrants entered the country annually during those four years. The influx of immigrants was temporarily impeded during the First World War but resumed after the war ended. Roughly speaking, the total population of the continental United States in 1890 was slightly over 62,600,000; in 1920, it was about to reach 106,000,000; the average ratio of foreign-born people to natives from 1890 to 1920 was about 14 percent. These numbers show the enormity of the immigrant influx into America during those three decades.¹²

In the early to mid-1920s, the United States started the National Origins Formula by introducing a series of quota systems to restrict immigration. The Immigration Act of 1924 (the Johnson-Reed Act) had a decisive impact on the influx of immigrants, virtually ending the era of mass immigration. The act

stipulated that the annual number of new immigrants from each country be limited to two percent of the existing population of that nationality in the United States as of the 1890 census. The Immigration Act of 1924 thus capped the total number of immigrants to about 164,700 per year; it achieved a “dramatic” effect in slumping European immigrants from more than 800,000 in 1921 to less than 150,000 in 1929.¹³

Positive Impact of Immigration Restriction

The National Origins Formula received harsh criticism partly because of its inhumane and racist elements—inhumane in that it jeopardized transborder family reunion among immigrants; racist in that it legitimized the selective acceptance or rejection of immigrants by “national” (which in practice meant ethno-racial) origin.¹⁴ Moreover, it was the civil rights movement that galvanized the American public mind and leadership into immigration reform. The majority of Americans then came to have serious qualms about the racist elements that were interwoven into many of America’s existing laws and policies, among which immigration law was no exception. The National Origins Formula was finally repealed in 1965.¹⁵

While there were understandable reasons to criticize the negative elements of the National Origins Formula, we should at least admit that it played a hugely influential role in assimilating turn-of-the-century immigrants into American society. Regarding this aspect, the American immigration historian Otis Graham points out that “some of the costs of an era of unrestricted immigration were much clearer when it was curbed.” According to Graham, the regulations during the 1920s virtually removed “from the center of American life” the question of immigration—a “contentious and divisive issue” that could have seriously split the public opinion in America. While some people had anticipated that the immigration regulations could cause labor shortages, the reality turned out to be precisely opposite. During the four decades of the National Origins Formula, American labor had become all the more efficient and achieved a remarkable increase in productivity.

Most notably, the immigration regulations created what Graham calls “a forty-year breathing space of relatively low immigration,” which would function favorably to assimilation:

The pressures toward joining the American mainstream did not have to contend with continual massive replenishment of foreigners, and immigrant communities realized that the “sojourn and return” pattern...was untenable...The result, to condense a complicated story, was that the squalid ghettos of the turn of the century thinned out, and the New Immigrants and their children moved rapidly toward the mainstream of American society...Without restriction, this story would plausibly have been one of high levels of social segmentation and conflict, rather than of successful and swift consolidation.

The major consequence of effectively controlled immigration was what Graham identifies as “the successful and surprisingly rapid assimilation of the New Immigrants.”¹⁶ A variety of European ethnicities had already arrived even during the pre-1924 years of mass immigration; for the next 40 years, they would achieve a considerable socio-economic advancement in America. If we would turn to the extent to which immigrants have been integrated into a “national existence,” we should regard assimilation during this period as a remarkable success; the majority of former immigrants have progressively transformed into the white middle class that is an essential component of mainstream American society. As for the majority of turn-of-the-century white ethnic immigrants from Europe as well as their descendants, their structural assimilation had fully been achieved by the mid-1960s.¹⁷

Conclusion

Despite its often-mentioned shortcomings, the concept of structural assimilation at least corresponds or caters to the reality of an era when the process of assimilation in America had continued swimmingly due to the positive impact of immigration restriction policy. With the ongoing process of assimilation, immigration-associated socio-cultural conflicts have simultaneously been (not wholly annihilated but at least) reduced to the extent that they could no longer be recognized as remarkable problems.

Meanwhile, we should admit that the National Origins Formula included undeniably racist elements that were especially manifested in the anti-Japanese clause of the Immigration Act of 1924. While the racist elements in the National Origins Formula were not completely forgotten even in the pre-1960s America, it is also a fact that they were often dismissed as some bearable costs for the merits of national unity and stability.¹⁸

We could not unconditionally rely on the past to gain lessons for the present. A critical look at the past is undoubtedly our generation’s responsibility. Speaking of immigrant assimilation, we should never underestimate the possibility that assimilation may turn into the coercion of certain socio-cultural conformity or even discrimination toward immigrant minorities. Meanwhile, the composition of immigrant populations in the United States has drastically changed from the era of the National Origins Formula. Immigration would no longer be limited to America’s domestic or national problem; it is now (whether you like it or not) an essential part of the global migration that needs to be considered in both international and domestic (or regional) perspectives.

However, I believe that the history of immigrant assimilation and immigration regulation in America could still teach us the following morals: (1) The core of assimilation theory remains intact. Once a host society decides to receive and assimilate foreign-born newcomers, they should then be accepted as equal members or integrated into its “national existence.” (2) Despite an undeniable tendency that immigration regulations could function more or less oppressively to immigrant minorities, it would also be true that

the liberal-nationalist principle of immigrant assimilation could function as a strong ideological basis in constraining the coercive aspects of immigration policy and making the regulations as balanced and rational as possible. (3) Whatever the type, an immigration policy that does not embrace the possibility of assimilation would close the path to civil equality; such a policy may well result in creating a society that would marginalize or even discriminate against immigrants.

Endnotes

- 1 This paper is a significantly revised and partially augmented version of my other paper that has been published in Japanese: 伊藤豊 「公益としての移民同化論」 (『公益学研究』 16, 2016) . A condensed version of this paper has been orally presented at the Joint Research Symposium (co-hosted by the School of Arts and Sciences, the University of San Carlos, and the Faculty of Social Science and Literature, Yamagata University), held at the University of San Carlos, Philippines, 16 March 2017. I would like to express my thanks for the comments that I received from the audience.
- 2 “Americanism: Address Delivered before the Knights of Columbus, Carnegie Hall, New York, Oct. 12, 1915,” in Theodore Roosevelt, *Fear God and Take Your Own Part* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1916): 361-362.
- 3 *L'Aurora* (Italian newspaper, Reading Pa.), June 12, 1920, cited in Edward George Hartmann, *The Movement to Americanize the Immigrant* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948): 257.
- 4 A standard or classical definition of “acculturation” is as follows: “Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups... Under this definition, acculturation is to be distinguished from...assimilation, which is at times a phase of acculturation” (Robert Redfield, Ralph Linton, and Melville Herskovits, “Memorandum for the Study of Acculturation,” *American Anthropologist* 38 [1936], George W. Stocking ed., *American Anthropology, 1921-1945: Papers from the American Anthropologist* [Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2002]: 258).
- 5 Robert E. Park, “Assimilation, Social,” Edwin R. A. Seligman and Alvin Johnson eds., *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* Vol. 2 (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1930), Vol. 2: 281.
- 6 The reader may wonder why I still endorse “assimilation” despite the fact that many scholars today prefer “integration.” They do so perhaps because they want to avoid the coercive overtones that the term assimilation could connote. While integration may sound milder or more politically correct than assimilation, my understanding is that (civil) integration is just a pre-stage toward (socio-cultural) assimilation as an ultimate goal or eventual consequence. Assimilation thus subsumes integration, but not vice versa.

The distinction between integration and assimilation is always problematic, as is exemplified in the argument by sociologist Christian Joppke. According to Joppke, assimilation is “transitive”: Immigrants turn into mere “objects” in the process of assimilation that is “done by others.” On the other hand, integration is an “intransitive” process that is “done by oneself,” says Joppke. “In this respect, policy can only provide incentives for choice, but choice itself has to be left to the individual.” Interestingly, he goes on to argue that the “consequence” of individual choices and actions for integration “may well be, perhaps even should be, ‘assimilation’” (Christian Joppke, *Veil: Mirror of Identity* [Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009]: 116). By blurring his previous clear-cut distinction this way, Joppke seems to implicitly admit that the civic integration of immigrant newcomers into a host society could not help bringing about their eventual assimilation.

- 7 Parts of my argument in this chapter come from my other paper: “Steinbeck, Immigrant Assimilation, and Multicultural Society in America,” *Steinbeck Studies* 40 (2017).
- 8 Milton M. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964): 81, 71, 80.
- 9 Richard Alba and Victor Nee, “Rethinking Assimilation Theory for a New Era of Immigration,” *The International Migration Review* 31 (WINTER, 1997): 835.
- 10 Herbert J. Gans, “Comment: Ethnic Invention and Acculturation: A Bumpy-Line Approach,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 11 (Fall, 1992): 44, 48, 49.
- 11 Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou, “The New Second Generation: Segmented Assimilation and Its Variants,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 530 (1993): 82.
- 12 The numbers here have been compiled from Bureau of the Census, Social Science Research Council, *Historical Statistics of the United States, 1789-1945: A Supplement to the Statistical Abstract of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1949): 30.
- 13 Michael Lemay and Elliott Robert Barkan eds., *U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Laws and Issues: A Documentary History* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999): 130. The Immigration Act of 1924 was also known as an anti-Japanese immigration law because it practically terminated Japanese immigration to America. However, the primary purpose of the law was not to suppress Japanese immigration but the further inflow of eastern and southern European immigrants that had sharply increased over the previous twenty years.
- 14 These condemnations officially appeared as early as the beginning of the 1950s. See *Whom We Shall Welcome: Report of the President’s Commission on Immigration and Naturalization* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1953), which was the commission’s report to President Harry Truman. Under his direction, the commission investigated the problems of current immigration regulations in 1952 and submitted the report the following year. In its conclusion, the report states that

the current immigration control “embodies policies and principles that are unwise and injurious to the nation. It rests upon an attitude of hostility and distrust against all aliens. It applies discriminations against human beings on account of national origin, race, creed and color.” (263) See also 119, 213 and 244-245 regarding the disruption of family reunion; 52-55 and 88-95 regarding the discriminatory and racist characteristics of immigration restriction.

- 15 For the influence of the civil rights movement on the Immigration Act of 1965, see Lemay and Barkan, 251-252.
- 16 Otis L. Graham, “The Unfinished Reform: Regulating Immigration in the National Interest,” Roger Daniels and Otis L. Graham, *Debating American Immigration, 1882-Present* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001) : 129, 130-131, 130.
- 17 For further argument, see Ito, “Steinbeck,” 38-39; Richard Alba, *Blurring the Color Line: The New Chance for a More Integrated America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009): 45-47.
- 18 The National Origins Formula was often justified by the popular concern that a vast number of “alleged undesirables” could easily infiltrate and “engulf the country.” One of the formula’s “avowed” (and in fact nominal) purposes was rather “qualitative” in that it “was concerned with the kind of persons coming into the United States rather than with their number.” However, its apparent intent lay in not only the numerical reduction but also the consequential relative increase of immigrants from certain areas of the world. What mattered most in this direction of immigration policy was cultural affinity: The National Origins Formula was introduced and “justified as an attempt to guarantee that particular ethnic, racial, or nationality groups would have preference for entry into the United States, on the assumption that they were more adaptable to American culture.” (*Whom We Shall Welcome*, 87, 83)

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20世紀初頭のアメリカにおいて、「移民の同化」は大きな課題であった。この文脈での同化には、ヨーロッパからの新来移民を安定した国民的組成へと取り込んでいくための、さまざまな試みが含まれる。いわゆる「ハイフン付きアメリカ人」に対する警戒感に見られるように、アメリカ社会の主流から見て「異質な他者」ととどまり続ける移民は、国民ならびに社会の一体性を毀損しかねない、深刻な脅威だとみなされたのである。

他方、多くの同時代人、とくに移民としての己の過去に自覚的であった人々にとっては、同化がしばしば強制的なアメリカ化を意味したことも否定できない。こうして同化あるいはアメリカ化に対する反感は、とくに新来移民の間でいっそう強まることになった。伝統的に「移民の国」とみなされてきたアメリカにおいて、彼らはその多様性のまさに根源であり、移民たちはそうした自覚に基づき、同化やアメリカ化への圧力を自身への侮辱だと非難したのである。

本稿の目的は、同化に対する上記のような反感の正当性がある程度認めつつ、同化のメリットも評価の視野に入れた、ある意味で折衷的な分析を提示することにある。20世紀初頭に有力であった移民同化論（それは実質的には、移民のアメリカ化と同義であった）には明らかな欠陥が伴っており、その点で同化への嫌悪は至極当然だと言える。ただし、こうした負の側面に着目するあまり、その半面にある肯定すべき歴史的遺産や現在における移民同化論の有用なポテンシャルまで、十把一絡げに無視してしまうべきではない。移民同化の営みは、それが適切に実施される限り、反移民的な偏見や差別を効果的に防止するための思想的な拠点を構築するのに役立つ、というのが本稿における私の主張である。

戦後アメリカにおける移民同化の意義を正しく理解するには、1920年代から60年代にかけて実施された出身地別移民規制（National Origins Formula）の再評価が、まず必須となる。好むと好まざるとにかかわらず、この規制の大きな影響の下に、世紀転換期のヨーロッパ人系移民はアメリカ社会の主流へと同化を果たしたのである。移民規制に関しては、そのネガティブな側面とポジティブな効果の両者を視野に入れて、バランスのとれた分析をおこなうことが必要であろう。