

ASSIMILATION

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The simplest meaning of the term assimilation is "becoming alike." When the immigrant is assimilated, he becomes like the people into whose midst he or his ancestors have moved. There is a political meaning of the word which is roughly equivalent to naturalization, by which is meant the legal process of renouncing foreign allegiance, taking an oath of loyalty, and assuming the duties and claiming the benefits of citizenship. Sociologists use the concept to denote the more profound changes that take place in the personality, attendant on the acceptance of the mores of the dominant group, a process which sometimes involves a very slight change and in other cases a modification so great that it may take several generations to effect it.

The post-war restrictions on immigration into the United States were designed to encourage the entrance of northern Europeans and to limit migration from southern and eastern Europe, based on the assumption that the latter were more difficult to assimilate. The prohibition of the Asiatic group was defended by the argument that they could not be assimilated at all, as the differences in racial characteristics were thought by the advocates of the legislation to be so great that there was no prospect of assimilation. Experience in the Hawaiian Islands has yielded important data for the understanding of this question and seems to show that the sociologist's conception of culture as independent of biological or racial limitations is a sound one.

It is conceivable that the process of assimilation or of being alike may require very little inner change or even none at all. Karl Schurtz was a graduate of a German University who came as a refugee after the revolution of 1848, with a knowledge of American life and manners and also of the language. It is hardly too much to say that Schurtz was assimilated before he landed. His conceptions of freedom and democracy were out of harmony with the Prussian regime which he left but essentially like those of the land to which he came. He was a soldier in the American army, a member of the United States senate, and a leader of thought in his adopted country for many years. There were many similar instances that could be cited.

It is obvious that the greater the initial difference, the more difficult is the process of becoming uniform; but in America, where the public schools are the most effective means of producing a uniformity of culture, the process can be shortened to the third generation at the longest, unless there are other circumstances that operate to retard it. Sometimes the immigrant group itself is reluctant to give up its identity and in some cases the dominant group is unwilling to accept those who seek admission. Ghetto communities with dietary rules that prevent their eating freely with others, and with a tradition of endogamy that requires the saying of prayers for the dead when one "marries out", are obviously difficult to assimilate. On the other hand, Negroes eagerly

seek admission only to be met with resistance. Moreover, the attempt of the home government from which the immigrants came to keep close contact with the immigrant group acts as a retarding influence, but the lasting effectiveness of these efforts is, perhaps, not very great.

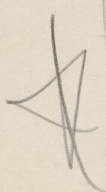
In order for one who is very unlike to change and be assimilated there must be very profound alterations. The old must be replaced by the new and this is not always easy nor indeed without pain. In a sense, the old culture must be uprooted and the new sentiments transplanted in the disturbed soil. But some growths are very difficult to uproot, and every gardener knows that evidences of surviving life are often seen when least wanted; and cultural survivals may, on occasion, furnish the material for cultural revivals and the necessary change be more difficult than ever.

Assimilation of isolated individuals takes place with the utmost readiness and the assimilation of isolated families may be expected to occur with a minimum of resistance. It is the compact community or neighborhood that gives rise to the immigrant "problem" and to the familiar difficulties. For sociologists have long known that the individual is not the real bearer of the culture and that the family cannot accurately be considered the cultural unit, since no family can exist without economic and social relations with other families; the children cannot find their mates at home; and every normal family must have neighbors. If no two immigrant families were to settle near each other, thus being forced to find their neighbors among the bearers of the prevailing culture, assimilation would be a very rapid process.

There is evidence for this statement to be found in abundance, but the most striking confirmation is perhaps an episode in the early eighteenth century in South Africa. After the revocation of the Edict of Nantes there occurred a relatively large migration of refugees to Cape Colony. The French Huguenots differed from the Dutch population in language, religion, customs, and manners. The governor, Van der Stel, welcomed the newcomers but decided to take precautions against the formation of an alien community. Accordingly, the new settlers were scattered among the Dutch so completely that the formation of a French community was impossible. The result was the complete merging of the new into the old and an assimilation that could hardly be more thorough. Their language their religion, their manners and customs, all disappeared, and they became wholly Dutch, doubtless adding vigor to the attack by intermarriage. The only evidence of them at present remaining is to be found in the family names such as Malherbe, Delarey, Villiers, Joubert, Rousseau and many others.

In the absence of administrative interference, however, the immigrants will seek to live in company with those who speak their language and have the same habits. It is impossible to continue wholly unchanged the manner of life that was lived in the ancestral villages; but diet, cuisine, holidays, customs of courtship and marriage, ceremonies connected with birth and death, these and many more are perpetuated in the immigrant community and mark them off from the inhabitants of the land as different. Some-

times these differences are regarded as quaint and picturesque, and sometimes with disapproval or even contempt; but in so far as they are different, they are not alike; and the difference constitutes a barrier to communication without which socialization cannot take place.



Isolation makes for differences and perpetuates them; communication and cooperation between groups or between a group and separate members of other groups tends to alter sentiments and habits and to produce the likeness that we call assimilation. Any conditions that make for isolation may, then, be regarded as obstacles to assimilation, for separatism is the logical opposite of assimilation.

Isolation is the obvious outcome of a compact neighborhood or community separated by intervening unoccupied land from other settlements. Such communities may remain for centuries unaffected by the prevailing culture, and assimilation be indefinitely postponed. The physicians in the hospitals in New Mexico tell of women in the pueblos who are allowed to die in childbirth because the people are unwilling to call in medical aid. And yet these villages have been surrounded by civilization for two or three hundred years and have been the object of Americanizing efforts for the past three generations. The very language of the people still survives; very little has happened to their habits of life; and almost nothing to their system of moral values and sentiments. Great changes may be expected in the next generation, however, for the government is now insisting on the attendance of the boys and girls in a boarding school, after three or four years of English language teaching in the village itself. In this boarding school the young people not only associate with those from other tribes and pueblos, but are taught the arts and the ideas of the modern world. When they return to the village there is always a measure of conflict and disorganization, for the transition can hardly be accomplished without painful adjustments.

There are areas in Europe which are occupied by many small communities, highly diverse in origin and culture, in which the prospect of assimilation seems indefinitely remote. In the republic of Czechoslovakia the schools in the small district of Trans-Carpathian Ruthenia are taught in thirteen languages. It would appear that only a momentous crisis would be able to break down these fantastic barriers to the cooperation and integration which are the conditions of an adequately organized national life. The dangerous plight of Czechoslovakia at the present time is a striking commentary of the effects of disunity in a political state, and of the consequences of a failure to accomplish the assimilation of a population.

Isolation is, of course, more difficult to overcome in those instances where the settlements antedate the regime which is trying to assimilate them. The World War would surely never have been fought if the Austrian government had known how to assimilate its constituent elements or, in the face of failure to do so, had acknowledged that it was impossible and adopted other less provocative methods. Assimilation is, then, not a mere academic subject;

an adequate understanding of the whole process would not only have prevented disastrous policies that have had tragic consequences, but would make possible more intelligent plans by contemporary makers of policy. The ruthless antisemitism of Hitler is apparently the outcome of a conviction that the assimilation of Jews is an impossibility.

Isolation is more effective if it is spatial and the group lives in a segregated area; but such segregation is not essential to isolation. The Gypsies have been in Europe for six centuries and entered America in colonial times. They are on every continent, including Australia, and have rarely had any settled residence; and yet no isolation is more complete, and their community life has resisted all assimilating influences to the present time. Once they lived in tents and drove in wagons over the country, mending tinware, trading horses, telling fortunes, and pilfering their victims. At present in America they travel in automobiles and rent empty stores in cities, but they are as alien to the values and sentiments that prevail here as if they were living in Albania.

The Jews are isolated by their scriptural food habits and, when these are weakened, there remains the scriptural endogamy. The *diaspora* forces them to consider the interests of their fellow Jews in all lands and may prevent that whole-hearted allegiance to the land of their adoption which is a condition of assimilation and consequent acceptance. Of course there are many Jews who are completely assimilated and whose Jerusalem is Washington, D.C., but antisemitism would be very rare if this characterized all Jews, if indeed, it would exist at all.

The value to the individual Jew of this solidarity is great, for it gives him a pride in his race and a heroic determination that Israel shall not die. The disadvantage is that assimilation is resisted, unlikeness emphasized, and dislike, hostility, prejudice, and discrimination are perpetuated. The assimilation of the Jews would seem to call for more patience and a longer view than it is reasonable to expect any one generation to possess.

Divergence and difference does not always occasion dislike and prejudice. While there is a strain for consistency and uniformity in the mores, yet divergence can become institutionalized. This is called accommodation. The caste system in India was more than a *modus vivendi*; it was a solution of the problem of racial difference. Yet there is reason to believe that this solution was not the final one and that modern forces and ideas will yet bring about serious conflicts. Accommodation is never permanent; it is only a provisional stability.

Assimilation is a cultural concept and not a political one and yet the word has little meaning apart from the problems of a sovereign political unit, and seems inapplicable apart from the lines on a map. Sweden did not assimilate the Norwegians, but now that Norway is independent they do not try. Germany tried unsuccessfully to assimilate the Poles; and now the Poles would like to assimilate their Germans. We do not think of the Americans as trying to assimilate the Mexicans in Mexico, but they do try to assimilate the Mexicans in Texas and Chicago. The most important

principle that was appealed by Wilson in his efforts to influence the writing of the treaty of Versailles was the principle of self-determination and, though the difficulties have proved greater than anyone thought them to be, the aim seems to have been to group together those peoples who could assimilate the divergent elements of their population.

The prevailing standard of life and morals is opposed to serious unlikenesses. The Mormons in Utah were far away from their fellow citizens, but their practice of polygamy was intolerable and its abandonment was forced upon a reluctant group. This was the price exacted for the privilege of statehood and not the result of violent compulsion, a method which is singularly ineffective.

The attempt of the Turks to force its divergent elements to conformity is an instructive example of the futility of persecution. The task was finally considered to be impossible and there occurred that remarkable exchange of populations after the war; the Greeks in Turkey being transferred to Greece, and the Turks in Greece moving to Turkey. Apparently there are conditions under which assimilation appears hopeless.

In America assimilation has been so rapid and has taken place on such a wide scale that we have come to expect it in all cases, and sometimes there is impatience if the process lags. Immigrant groups are reproached for not changing faster than they can, and immigrants are sometimes embittered because their efforts to be counted as assimilated encounter resistance.

It is a paradox that America wants her immigrants to be assimilated and yet ambitious immigrants knock in vain for admission into privileges and positions to which they have come to aspire. This is a familiar situation with the second generation individual who is sometimes plaintive and unhappy and sometimes angry and rebellious because he cannot be received "as an individual," since he feels himself to be "as American as any one else." But the paradox is only apparent. The alien group is always conceptualized. Antisemitism never has meant that the most rabid antisemite is hostile to all Jews. The feeling and the attitude is toward the "race" and the race is not an object of perception. And in order for an individual to be received "just as an individual," he must be dissociated from the group against which there is an unfavorable attitude. The nature of human thought and feeling is such that we cannot avoid thinking in terms of classes and concepts. The marginal man, whether a biological hybrid or a cultural mixture, is a transition phenomenon and the dissociation which would be to his advantage often requires more time than he has at his disposal.

The phenomenon of race prejudice is closely related to this process. An isolated unassimilated group that has little contact with others encounters very little prejudice or discrimination. The Mennonite farming communities in Pennsylvania are unassimilated. They do not vote, refuse to go to war, "dress plain", are endogamous, and even think of themselves as "peculiar". And yet they are not the object of prejudice or discrimination, being regarded as thrifty, honest, highly moral, very industrious, and incidentally, excellent customers.

At the other extreme a completely assimilated group is one that has disappeared as a separate group and the years have seen all prejudice disappear when the immigrant has lost his strangeness and has merged with the body of citizens.

It is rather in the *process* of transition from alien to citizen, considered not as an individual but as a group phenomenon, that prejudice and discrimination appears. This is often accentuated in times of stress when the stranger competes successfully and underbids the native. Resistance is not encountered by those who do not strive, neither by those who have achieved their goal, but rather by those members of a group which is on the way, but has not yet arrived.

Race prejudice is, therefore, a symptom and not a specific evil. It is a phenomenon of transition, however prolonged the transition may be. As a "problem" it is easier to understand if it is considered as the manifestation of other conditions; the real problem is to deal with the conditions under which it arises. And just as a recurrent fever will not subside till it has reached its peak and then will subside without a febrifuge, so race prejudice cannot be expected to disappear with suddenness. The usual discussion of race prejudice are carried on in moralistic terms and the finger of scorn is pointed at those who are to blame. An accurate scientific understanding of it, when we shall have secured such an understanding, will afford light where now is only heat, and will enable a sounder program, and policy than has yet appeared.

Reference has been made to the American public schools, without which it is doubtful whether America would have remained a nation. It is in the public schools that the children are led to think in terms of plural pronouns; and say "we", "our", and "us." And every occasion or enterprise or crisis that brings men together into a group with the feeling of "we", is an influence in the direction of likeness and therefore of assimilation.

Assimilation is the expected outcome in America of racial diversity, but he who expects it to happen suddenly or even soon is entertaining an error which may be the occasion of grief. It takes, under present conditions, time, and a long time. The transition stage is always productive of disturbance and discomfort and those who suffer disappointment because they are in the midst of the transition might be more patient or at least more understanding if the exact nature and limits of assimilation were known and understood. An accurate sociological knowledge of assimilation might prevent much heart burning in the breasts of those who are hurt and wounded because they cannot have at once, in this season, the fruits of a harvest that require a long, long while to mature.

The English absorbed and assimilated thoroughly the conquering Normans and the conquered Welch. The Chinese have assimilated more than one alien race. When we think of assimilation, we shall perhaps think more accurately if we think in terms of centuries.