

MULTICULTURAL AMERICA. ETHNICAL ADAPTATION TO AMERICAN CULTURE

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Abstract: *The best well-known definition of America is that it is a multicultural country, bringing together people of different nationalities. This definition of America has been so often used that it has become a cliché and nowadays, whenever we think of the United States of America, most of us immediately associate this country with multiculturalism. Though a cliché, this phrase expresses the truth. Multiculturalism brings about many problems, such as political, economic and social difficulties, but nonetheless, America is one of the greatest world powers, if not the greatest, and thus the fact that it is the country made up of different peoples is not a drawback for its development. The main purpose of this paper is to analyze the extent to which the America we know nowadays is the result of the influences it received from its immigrants, but also to see how the immigrants coming to America were influenced by the American culture. This study presents how America adapted to its multicultural status and what it adopted from its immigrants, but also how the immigrants adapted to the American culture and what they adopted from it. The main ethnic groups that immigrated to America are highlighted and their impact on the American culture as well as the influence the American culture had upon them. As a conclusion, an overall view of the American society is given in order to understand whether the influence that the American culture had over its immigrants was greater than the one it received from them. Therefore, the present paper will conclude whether America adapted to its ethnic groups of immigrants or whether they adapted to the American culture, relinquishing their cultural individuality.*

Key words: *culture, multiculturalism, America, adaptation, assimilation, immigration, individuality.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The present-day America is a country that started up as a group of British colonies. The first European settlers came to America around 1607, but the great migration took place in 1620 and 1630 when Plymouth Colony and Massachusetts Bay Colony were founded respectively.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the American settlers made their great movement towards the western part of the country, away from the Atlantic Coast. In their advancement, the English settlers came across the native inhabitants of the country, namely the Indians.

The relations between the Native Americans and the English colonists have been tense right from the beginning, being dominated by hostility and violence. Considering that they

were savages, the English settlers thought that they had the right to relegate the Native Americans from their own lands, and ultimately, they ended up by destroying them.

Therefore, the present-day America started as a colony, a group of immigrants that left their country mainly for religious and economic reasons and it seems that its destiny of being the immigrants' country was established from that moment on.

After the English colonies obtained their freedom by winning the Independence War, the country reached a sort of stability and in time, as Europe started to have certain difficulties related to economy or wars, more and more European immigrants came to America in search for a better life.

American immigration history can be viewed in four epochs: the colonial period, the mid-nineteenth century, the turn of the

twentieth and post-1965. Each epoch brought distinct national groups – races and ethnicities – to the United States. The mid-nineteenth century saw mainly an influx from northern Europe; the early twentieth century mainly from Southern and Eastern Europe; post-1965 mostly from Latin America and Asia.

Between 1850 and 1930, about 5 million Germans immigrated to the United States with a peak in the years between 1881 and 1885, when a million Germans left Germany and settled mostly in the Midwest. Between 1820 and 1930, 3.5 million British and 4.5 million Irish entered America.

After 1840, the Catholics arrived in large numbers, partly because of the famines of the 1840s. Starting with the two World Wars and the rise of Communism, even more Europeans left the countries in order to escape the horrors of a totalitarian regime. It is in this period that America started to gain the reputation of the dream country, the country of all possibilities and the American Dream was everybody's desire.

Legal immigration to the United States increased from 250,000 in the 1930s to about 10 million in the 1990s. Since 2000, legal immigrants to the U.S. number about 1,000,000 per year, out of them more than a half are change of status immigrants.

2. AMERICAN MULTICULTURALISM

This world-wide mass immigration towards America that took place over the years created a multicultural society in which tensions and discrimination are no strangers.

The problem of assimilation has always been a major dilemma for the immigrants. According to Adalberto Aguirre and Jonathan H. Turner, assimilation stands for '*the process by which the members of an ethnic group become part of the broader culture and society, losing their distinctive character*' [1]. In other words, for immigrants to assimilate, they must abandon their original cultural attributes and conform entirely to the behaviors and customs of the majority of native-born population.

Although opinions about the American policy in respect to immigrants are different, it

is generally acknowledged that America does not impose this process of assimilation on its immigrant ethnic groups.

If compared with France, whose official policy imposes that the immigrants abandon their native customs, America has a far lighter guiding principle, trying to assimilate its immigrants step by step, without repudiating the immigrant culture. The roots of Americans' predisposition in favor of assimilation reach deep into the American psyche. This predisposition is undoubtedly encouraged by the personal and collective memories and aspirations of a nation of immigrants, but, as Peter D. Salins considers that the American assimilation owes its power to four unique aspects of the American society: 1) the liberal, universalist ideas embedded in the U.S. Constitution; 2) the universal commitment to an economy built on market capitalism; 3) the density and redundancy of organizational life – governmental, political, religious, social, economic and philanthropic; and 4) a persistent, society-wide infatuation with modernity and progress. Each factor by itself is assimilationist. Together, they make assimilation irresistible [5].

Assimilation is an important stage that follows the immigration process. To a certain extent, every ethnic group that permanently settles in America ends up by being a part of the American culture, in time. But in their turn, these ethnic groups also influence the American society by shaping its multicultural foundations.

Generally, the American immigrant ethnic groups are divided into four main categories as Adalberto Aguirre and Jonathan H. Turner have noticed in their book entitled *American Ethnicity*: African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans and White ethnic Americans. The last category is further subdivided into Irish Americans, Italian Americans and Jewish Americans.

3. AFRICAN AMERICANS

The African Americans form the ethnic group that experienced the least the benefits of the so-called American Dream. The 'legacy' of two hundred years of slavery, thirty years of post-Civil War oppression and fifty more years

of discrimination in almost every social sphere made it hard for them to fully be accepted by the American society.

Of all the other ethnic groups, the African Americans are the ones that were harder to assimilate. Nonetheless, certain features of their culture have infiltrated into the American culture in time. At first, slavery greatly restricted the ability of Africans in America to practice their cultural traditions. But with the passing of time and the changing of their social status, all those values and beliefs that survived the initial oppression, have modified or blended with European American culture and unique African American traditions started to flourish as distinctive traditions or radical innovations in music, art, literature, religion, cuisine and other fields.

The culture of this ethnic group often developed separately from mainstream American culture because of the persistence of racial discrimination in America as well as African Americans' desire to maintain their own traditions. Consequently, the African American culture obtained a double status: on the one hand, it has become a significant part of American culture and on the other hand, it remains a distinct cultural body within this larger American culture.

The African culture has shaped African American religious, familial, political and economic behaviors. The mark of Africa is obvious in numerous ways, in politics, economics, language, music, hairstyles, religion, fashion, dance, cuisine and worldview.

Arts, music and dance are the domains where the African Americans have had a huge influence, at first with their gospel music and jazz and later on with hip hop and rap.

African American culture has had an omnipresent, transformative impact on many elements of mainstream American culture and over time, the culture of African slaves and their descendants has been ever-present in its impact not only on the dominant American culture, but on world culture as well.

4. HISPANIC AMERICANS

Hispanics number 45.5 million people representing about 15% of the total United

States population. They form the second largest ethnic group after non-Hispanic White Americans. This ethnic group has lived continuously in the territory of the present-day United States since the 1565 founding of St. Augustine, Florida by the Spanish, therefore being a constant presence on the territory of America well before the Anglo culture became dominant.

Hispanic communities have also been living continuously in Texas, New Mexico and California since the 18th century. This is why their assimilation has not been as easily made as in the case of other ethnic groups.

The term '*hispanization*' represents the opposite process of assimilation, namely, the process by which a place or a person absorbs characteristics of Hispanic society and culture.

Hispanic Americans have made many contributions to the United States ranging from politics, military, music, sports and economy.

The main influence is manifested in such fields as music and film represented by many well known and appreciated Hispanic artists in present-day America as well as sports and food represented by Hispanic traditional dishes such as tortilla or taco which are very famous in America.

Popular culture varies widely from one Hispanic community to another, but despite this, several features tend to unite Hispanics. Many Hispanics, including U.S.-born second and third generation Mexican-Americans, use the English language on a regular basis and the Spanish language to varying degrees. More than half of U.S. Hispanics are bilingual in English and Spanish. Another one quarter speaks Spanish only, and the rest – one in seven Hispanics – speak English only.

Overall, about three-fourths of the Hispanic population speaks English, most of them very well due to the fact that about 60% of Hispanics are U.S.-born.

5. ASIAN AMERICANS

Asian Americans are Americans of Asian ancestry including sub-ethnic groups such as: Chinese Americans, Filipino Americans, Indian Americans, Vietnamese Americans, Korean Americans, Japanese Americans.

In the second half of the 20th century, being encouraged by the 1965 Immigration Act, Asians from many different groups immigrated in larger numbers to America, often arriving as college students or skilled workers with degrees. They are considered to be the 'model minority' as their culture contains a high work ethic, respect for elders, a high degree of professional and academic success, high valuation of family, education and religion.

The Asian Americans' influence on the American culture can be found in such domains as music and entertainment, food, but also in the medical area. Yoga is also an oriental trend that has been easily adopted by the American culture as well as healthy eating customs.

6. WHITE ETHNIC AMERICANS

The White ethnic Americans form a group divided into three main sub-groups: the Irish Americans, the Italian Americans and the Jewish Americans.

6.1. IRISH AMERICANS

According to the American Community Survey of 2006, about 12% of the total American population is of Irish ancestry. Irish Catholics had been coming to the United States in moderate numbers even before the American Revolution.

During and after the Great Irish Famine of 1845-1850, millions of Irish Catholics came to North America. Many lived in Canada and the United States.

This ethnic group has always been a popular target for stereotyping; the media often stereotyped the Irish in America as being boss-controlled, violent, voting illegally, addicted to alcohol and dependent on street gangs that were often violent or criminal.

The greatest influence that this ethnic group has had in the American culture is manifested through the annual celebration of Saint Patrick's Day, this traditional Irish religious holiday becoming an opportunity to celebrate all things Irish. The largest celebration of the holiday takes place in New York, where the annual St. Patrick's Day Parade draws an average of two million people.

The Irish Americans have contributed to the United States culture in a wide variety of fields: the fine and performing arts, film, literature, politics, sports and religion.

6.2. ITALIAN AMERICANS

The Italian Americans constitute the fifth largest ancestry group in America with about 18 million people representing about 6% of the total U.S. population.

Many Italian Americans still retain aspects of their culture. This includes Italian food, drink, art, Roman Catholicism, annual Italian American feasts and a strong commitment to extended family.

Italian Americans influenced popular music in the 1940s. In the field of arts, their culture and customs have always been the interest of the cinema history, but movies such as *The Godfather* or television series such as *The Sopranos* led to the unfair association of the Italian Americans with the organized crime.

The influence of this ethnic sub-group on the American culture is mainly manifested through the celebration of their feasts. At present, no other ethnic group celebrates as many feasts as the Italian American: almost 300 such feasts take place throughout the United States and are visited each year by millions of Americans from various backgrounds who come together to enjoy Italian delicacies such as zeppole, pizza and sausage sandwiches.

Though in the past, and still unto this day, much of Italian American culture is centered around music and food, in recent years, a large and growing group of Italian American authors are having success publishing and selling books in America.

6.3. JEWISH AMERICANS

Jews have been present in what is today the United States of America as early as the seventeenth century. Large scale Jewish immigration, however, did not commence until the nineteenth century, when, by mid-century, many secular Jews from Germany arrived in the United States, primarily becoming merchants and shop owners.

The 19th and 20th century persecution that took place in Eastern Europe led to a massive Jewish immigration towards America.

Nowadays, this ethnical sub-group consists of about seven million people representing 2.5% of the American population.

Unlike the other ethnic groups or sub-groups presented here, the American Jews have been more influenced by the American culture than influencing it themselves. This idea is justified by high rate of intermarriage which has risen from roughly 6% in 1950 to approximately 45% in 2000 and only about 33% of intermarried couples raise their children with a Jewish religious upbringing. Therefore, this ethnic community is somehow in danger of losing its traditions under the influence of the American culture.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The multicultural status of the United States of America is an undeniable reality. The mass immigration that took place over the years created a unique society that came to be defined through the famous metaphor of the '*melting pot*', a metaphor which implies that all the immigrant cultures are mixed and amalgamated without state intervention.

The '*melting pot*' implies that each individual immigrant and each group of immigrants assimilated into the American society improves their income and social status on the way. It reflected and influenced official policy: although language courses were offered, they were rarely compulsory. As a result, several immigrant communities maintained a non-English language for generations.

The nature of American national identity, with its emphasis on symbolic patriotism and national values, facilitated the assimilation of immigrants.

The *melting pot attitude* did not require a detailed knowledge of American history, acquisition of a complex cultural heritage. It allowed interest in the culture of the country of origin and family ties with that particular country.

The *melting pot* concept has been criticized as an idealized version of the assimilation process. One common criticism is that it

apparently did not apply to English-speaking U.S.-born black people who stayed at the bottom of the social scale from the American Civil War on. Another criticism is that the *melting pot* model described the assimilation of immigrants from Europe rather than the assimilation of any immigrant.

According to John Jay, the growth in the use of Spanish language and the *melting pot* tradition co-exist with a belief in a national unity dating from the American Founding Fathers: '*Providence has been pleased to give this one connected country to one united people – a people descendent from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, attached to the same principles of government, very similar in their manners and customs. This country and this people seem to have been made for each other, and it appears as if it was the design of Providence, that an inheritance so proper and convenient for a band of brethren, united to each other by the strongest ties, should never be split into a number of unsocial, jealous, and alien sovereignties*' [3].

Of all the many different nationalities and ethnic groups which have contributed to the making of America, some have been quickly assimilated. They have lost or intentionally given up many of those specific markers which would make them different from their neighbors.

This process of assimilation or '*Americanization*' became part of the immigrant experience in American history and characterized the process of *melting pot*.

Other Americans, while becoming Americans, have maintained much of their unique identities. In this sense, U.S. society has transformed into a *salad bowl*. This does not mean that these Americans are less proud of their American nationality. Japanese Americans provide a well-known example about their loyalty in WWII when they and many of their countrymen became the most highly decorated American soldiers fighting in Europe.

Of course, the blending of people of different races, cultures and religions brings about many inconveniences and it is probably one of the main reasons why America is such a violent country, mainly because of

discrimination. But nonetheless, this mixture also creates a special society in which so many different customs and traditions are brought together, like in no other country.

America is the place where numerous cultures come into contact. This contact implies influence, as one culture adopts features from the other cultures and the other way round.

The main culture is the American one, represented by the traditions and customs of the first British colonies.

This mainstream culture has been shaped and reshaped over the decades as it received the influence of the cultures the immigrants brought along with them, thus creating the present-day multicultural America.

But in their turn, the different ethnic groups of immigrants had to accustom themselves to the main stream culture and to adapt their custom to it, as they represented minorities.

The percentage of cultural influence differs from one ethnic group to another. Of all the ethnic groups presented here, the American Jews are the ones who have been more influenced by the American culture than influential towards it.

The variety of ethnic identities, immigration experiences and the immigrants, the cultural choices that have created different societies, all these issues are so complex that describing one of these societies becomes very difficult.

Multiculturalism represents one of the most important characteristics and 'problems' of the

world today, though this extraordinary and complex process has lasted for centuries.

Multiculturalism as a process includes elements like language, thought, tradition, music, cuisine, fashion, skin color, physical features and character into one single unit, creating a culture of all cultures.

As a conclusion, we may state that the present-day United States are the result of the country's adapting to and adopting new cultural influence that came along from its immigrants, thus becoming the greatest multicultural nation and a strong world power.

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