

CHAPTER 1
ETHNICITY, IDENTITY, AND MULTICULTURALISM
IN THE UNITED STATES.

There she lies, the great melting pot- listen!
Can't you hear the roaring and the bubbling?
Israel Zangwill

The United States is one of the most ethnically diversified countries in the world. This has led to the remarkable conformation of a multicultural society with all the advantages that the convergence of cultures produces in the building of a nation. However, the path to a prejudice-free society has not been easy and is, certainly not, yet completed.

In this chapter we will be discussing the concepts employed to explain the peculiar acculturation phenomenon that has been shaping the face of the United States since its origin.

Floyd Rudmin argues that acculturation refers to “the processes by which individuals, families, communities, and societies react to inter-cultural contact” (Catalogue of Acculturation Constructs). Rudmin further explains, that “when peoples of different cultures interact and intermix, they have some probability of adopting each other’s products, technologies, behaviors, languages, beliefs, values and social institutions”. As seen in the United States, when intending to speak about “American culture”, we inexorably speak about the multiple cultures that have taken part in shaping its current form.

Acculturation is not a painless experience. According to William Petersen, “it seems to be generally true that attempts to acculturate to the dominant population arise

from an initial insecurity, and that from later security there develops in turn a yearning to distinguish one's group from the mass"(8).

Certainly, acculturation has been an important process in the shaping of modern societies, although, it is as ancient as times itself. The acculturation process has been formally studied for several decades, particularly in societies that have learned the importance of understanding the key component of its foundations, its people. Thus, by revising the most important approaches, that explain the relationship among ethnic groups, we could be able to discern the current role that Hispanics play in this highly diversified society.

First of all, in order to clearly discuss the various acculturation or assimilation movements that have taken place in the United States, it is convenient to define two concepts that represent the essence of a society: Ethnicity and Identity.

1.1 ETHNICITY

Ethnicity is a central theme, *perhaps the central theme*, of American history according to Stephen Thernstrom (Petersen, foreword). Thernstrom sustains that the character of the United States as nation has definitely been shaped by the interaction of people coming from various nationalities, as well as, different religions and race groups.

However, the concept of ethnicity does not refer to a uniform phenomenon, as Aleksandra Alund points out. She acknowledges that "most scholars in the field of ethnicity agree that the concept refers to group formation, the drawing of cultural and/or social boundaries between 'us' and 'the Others', identity, the feeling of belonging, symbolic community, etc." (107).

Still, the concept creates a lot of confusion. Therefore, it is useful to discern the original meaning of it. The word “ethnic” comes from the Greek *ethnikos*, which means national, gentile, and derived from *ethnos*, which signifies nation, people or race. In addition, “Nation” comes from Latin *natio* which means, birth. Consequently, as William Petersen explains, both words “ethnic” and “nation” were originally used to set outsiders as a class. Eventually, the original biological approach, stretched to include cultural characteristics and political structures (2).

Certainly, as Petersen indicates, race is undoubtedly the most important criteria of ethnicity (5). On the other hand, Milton Gordon stressed that, “ethnicity meant a sense of peoplehood” (cit. Petersen 137) regardless of racial configurations. Thus, when applying the term ethnicity regarding the case of Hispanics in the United States, the notion becomes quite imprecise; on the next chapter, we will be focusing on this matter.

Ethnicity is, as we have seen, a concept modified from its original meaning to label the groups that nowadays integrate multicultural societies aiming to illustrate the cultural diversity that has become the reality of a country.

“Ethnic diversity, the legacy of political conquests and migrations, is one aspect of the social complexity found in most contemporary societies. The nation-state has traditionally been uneasy with ethnic diversity, and nation-states have often attempted to eliminate or expel ethnic groups. Most nations today practice some form of pluralism, which usually rests on a combination of toleration, interdependence, and separatism. The concept of ethnicity is more important today than ever, as a result of the spread of doctrines of freedom, self-determination, and democracy (<http://www.britannica.com>)”.

Ethnicity recognition has become a new power used worldwide, and in the United States is no exception. If we take the premise presented by Petersen that, this new worldwide rise of ethnicity is based on the broader functions of the state, the desire of a specific group in obtaining whatever that state may be distributing, and particularly, the desire of preventing others from obtaining it (19) then, we are looking into a movement that is deemed to become stronger sociological force.

1.2 IDENTITY

It was J. Hector St. John Crevecoeur, who in 1782, posed one of the most significant questions regarding American identity: What is an American? Although, Crevecoeur at the time, tried to unravel what the essence of American identity was, it is very unlikely that his findings could be applied to what is nowadays considered an American.

By definition, identity is construed as to the fact of being the same. That is, the condition of being the same with something described or asserted (Merriam-Webster dictionary). Identity is a people's source of meaning and experience according to Manuel Castells. Castells remarks that identity, since referred to social actors, is the construction of meaning on the basis of a cultural elements, that is, history, geography, collective memory, power apparatuses, religion... (6)

Could it be that identity is a term that has also been used as a tool to provide a sense of homogeneity within a society? The father of the concept, Erik H. Erikson, remarked that "We begin to conceptualize matters of identity at the very time in history when they become a problem. For we do so in a country which attempts to make a

superidentity out of all the identities imported by its constituent immigrants” (cit. Petersen 57). Then, does the idea of identity become an element of anxiety in societies with cultural diversity? In the United States, it apparently does so. Definitely, the definition of an American identity was something that was insistently sought by the people in the newly created America of the eighteenth century.

“The fact that the American people were of diverse ethnic strains was not overlooked in discussions of nationality, but because of the nature of the events that brought the nation to birth, the American identity was conceived primarily in abstract ideological terms. Ethnic considerations were subsidiary” (Petersen 58-59).

Arthur Mann further explains that the important thing about Americans was that they were not interested on the origins of their predecessors, but that they believed in the United States as an ideal that captured the values proposed by the Enlightenment (73).

Different approaches for explaining -and shaping- the American identity have not been definite. When discussing a society in constant change, assumptions turn out to be dangerous leads to the understanding of the American being.

1.3 THE PROCESS OF ASSIMILATION: AMERICANIZATION VS MULTICULTURALISM.

Assimilation, or the lack of it, represents the focal point in the discussion regarding the acceptance of new immigrants and the conformation of the modern American society. Defining the concepts of ethnicity and identity has probably been the most important element in the interpretation of American culture.

The United States very soon in its history, had to face the fact that social integration was needed if America was to become a great nation. The inexorable arrival of new immigrants forced the recently defined Americans to establish the elements that would grant them, the very needed, sense of belonging. By confronting the idea of Americanization with that of Multiculturalism, the United States has arrived to a point where a new approach is required to understand its population.

1.3.1 AMERICANIZATION

So, what exactly does a person need to do to be considered an American? When speaking of an American identity most people would agree that an American is the one who speaks English and is a firm believer of American values, meaning democracy and liberty. Thus, Gleason mentions that, “some have interpreted true Americanism as requiring close conformity to the cultural majority in language, religion, and manners, while others have adopted a more relaxed position about the range of variation that could be accommodated within the national identity” (84). However, both approaches leave a great margin for interpretation.

Notwithstanding a great enthusiasm for the creation of a novel nation, some people tend to linger to the old ways. The persistence of identifying oneself with the culture of our parents is, in most cases, relentless. The Americanization movement certainly had its ups and downs since the establishment of the United States. But it certainly was, the essence of that search for identity. Great efforts to consolidate Americanization were seen before, during, and after World War I. As David M. Reimers explains, the patriotism of those times even dictated the banning of foreign languages, particularly the case of the German tongue (120). Americanization then, meant obliging

the population not only to embrace loyalty to the United States, but also letting go to those cultural links that had turned into a major concern.

Gleason considers that the major legacy of the Americanization movement was to turn the concept into a bad word, even in its generic meaning of assimilation (89).

1.3.2 THE MELTING POT

When Crèvecoeur attempted to answer his fundamental question on what an American was, curiously, he stressed the fact that this new man was the result of a strange mixture of blood, not found in any other country. By noticing this phenomenon, he concluded that a brand new being had been born (Letters from an American Farmer). Nowadays, the concept of the melting pot is the most sought after when discussing the interaction of diverse ethnic groups within a society.

Israel Zangwill's play *The Melting Pot*, performed in 1909, marked the beginning of an idea that would lure the American society into believing in a complete convergence and *mélange* of cultures. As Philip Gleason sustains, "the symbol of the melting pot invited an interpretation of assimilation as a purposeful process of burning off impurities and molding immigrants to a predetermined type" (80). Gleason further explains that, the idea of the melting pot proposed the acceptance of the new immigrants and their incorporation into the American mainstream, however, in this complex of ideas it was believed that the emerging American nationality would be enriched by the new diverse ethnic components (81).

Although, the melting pot theory may seem like the ultimate social achievement, it did not prove to be applicable to the masses, at least in the United States of the 20th century. The reasons for this could be of many different sorts, but specifically, Arthur

Mann argues that the melting pot “ignores the persistence of ethnicity and denies the legitimacy, and value, of ancestral groups” (78).

Despite all the good intentions, there is still a long way for the United States to be considered a melting pot. Certainly, intermarriage is no longer frowned upon, though it does not represent a popular trend. It is very clear that ethnic resiliency has been particularly strong since the 1960’s and it seems very unlikely to fade, as times of social disillusionment require a strong cultural column to support this society.

1.3.3 MULTICULTURALISM

Most people consider multiculturalism a way of explaining those societies with a proliferation of a variety of cultures. All over the world, countries have experienced large numbers of immigrants with their own cultures and languages. This multicultural reality is not hassle-free, however, it has led to constant cultural exchanges that, undoubtedly, have benefited both groups.

Cultural pluralism or multiculturalism came as a response to the excesses linked to Americanization movement, particularly those from bigotry. The article entitled “Democracy versus the Melting Pot; A Study of American Nationality” written in February 1915 by Horace M. Kallen, held that a sole American nationality product of a melting pot was not possible and not even convenient. Kallen stated that in order to achieve the real American nationality there were two courses of action: unison or harmony.

“The "American race" is a totally unknown thing... The unison to be achieved cannot be a unison of ethnic types. It must be, if it is to be at all, a unison of social and historic interests, established by the complete cutting-off of the ancestral memories of our populations, the enforced, exclusive use of the English language

and English and American history in the schools and in the daily life. The attainment of the other alternative, a harmony, also requires concerted public action. But the action would do no violence to our fundamental law and the spirit of our institutions, nor to the qualities of men. It would seek simply to eliminate the waste and the stupidity of our social organization, by way of freeing and strengthening the strong forces already in operation. Starting with our existing ethnic and cultural groups, it would seek to provide conditions under which each may attain the perfection that is proper to its kind. The provision of such conditions is the primary intent of our fundamental law and the function of our institutions. And the various nationalities which compose our commonwealth must first of all learn this fact, which is perhaps, to most minds, the outstanding ideal content of "Americanism" – that democracy means self-realization through self-control, self-government, and that one is impossible without the other.

Thus, Kallen suggested that with the preservation and strengthening of ethnic diversity, democracy in America would be consolidated.

Multiculturalism or cultural pluralism has had an enormous impact on the developing of the American society. Russell Jacoby expresses that, “few causes have won such widespread enthusiasm as pluralism and its incarnations as multiculturalism, cultural diversity and cultural pluralism... even conservatives, who might be expected to swim against the current, often jump in” (31).

Undoubtedly, the United States has struggled for a long time to find its identity. It is still not possible to assert which elements actually comprise what is to be known as “American culture”. Certainly, the approaches here discussed meant to fulfill a basic need: to realize who they are. So, Gleason concludes that “to affirm the existence of American nationality does not mean that all Americans are exactly alike or must become uniform in order to be real Americans. It simply means that a genuine national community does exist and that it has its own distinctive principle of unity, its own history, and its own appropriate sense of belongingness by virtue of which individuals

identify with the symbols that represent and embody that community's evolving consciousness of itself"(141).

Whatever the concept used for describing the American society, all will tend to fail as the constant transformation of its population becomes the norm and not the exception. Lawrence Fuchs considers that there is no metaphor that can actually describe the complex ethnic dynamics in the United States. Certainly, the term melting-pot became obsolete, so he proposes to refer this phenomenon as "Kaleidoscope": ever changing forms, patterns and colors (276).

As the discussion for identity goes on, and new, or recycled, approaches permeate the lives of Americans, there is one thing that remains authentic: Immigration is and has been the backbone of the United States. As the American society vaunts on the benefits of their core values, people from all over the globe will continue to be attracted by the American dream and some will do what ever it takes to get it.

1.4 WAVES OF IMMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES.

In recent decades, immigration has represented an extremely delicate issue due to the strong opinions it provokes in different sectors of the society. Several scholars, politicians, and the mass media have expressed their antagonism to immigration. However, on the early stages of the American nation immigration had been a necessity. Handlin points out that "Immigration had so long been a familiar aspect of American development that it was not until the end of the nineteenth century that any question was raised as to the propriety of its continuance. The whole history of the peopling of the

continent had been one of immigration” (1). Then, what are the reasons to so strongly reject new comers: Racism? Bad economy? Over population? or all of the above?

Certainly, the United States of America has had a peculiar rapport with immigration since the arrival of the first Spanish and English settlers to the waves of immigration in the present day. Immigration has been a perennial phenomenon and it has gone thru all levels of acceptance.

The United States were born from a series of world events that lead to the creation of a collective consciousness searching for a haven. Floods of people went for that dream.

“It is clear that the cause of so vast an exodus was wider than race or nationality and deeper than legislation or politics. It was not the mania of a single generation, nor of ideas that prevailed for a mere decade or two. The cause was as universal as the movement itself”(Handlin, 10).

Although, the United States did become a shelter for certain groups of people in search of liberty and better economic opportunities, early immigration laws prohibited the legal entrance of Asians (particularly those coming from China with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882), and Africans mainly entered as slave workers. Germans, Italians, English, and Irish became the largest ethnic groups comprising the population of the United States before World War I.

The following chart reflects the principal sources of immigration to the United States and their peak year from 1820 to 1950.

TABLE 1.1 PRINCIPALS SOURCES OF IMMIGRATION TO THE U.S.: 1820-1950.

Country	Total arrivals in 130 years.	Peak year
Germany	6,248,529	1882
Italy	4,776,884	1907
Ireland	4,617,485	1851
Great Britain	4,386,692	1888
Austria-Hungary	4,172,104	1907
Russia	3,343,895	1913
Mexico	838,844	1924
Poland	422,326	1921
China	398,882	1882
Netherlands	268,619	1882

Source: Handlin 16.

1.4.1 IMMIGRATION ACTS.

The massive immigration to the United States is due to people's want for a better present and future. Joseph S. Nye Jr. states that "America is a magnet and many people can envisage themselves as Americans" (119). However, an American society concerned over the configuration of its nation prescribed several laws regarding the fluxes of immigration thus, regulating the privilege of entrance for certain ethnic groups. On May

19, 1921, for example, the United States Congress passed the Emergency Quota Act establishing national quotas on immigration. The quotas were based on the number of foreign-born residents of each nationality who were living in the United States as of the 1910 census.

A more complex quota plan replaced this "emergency" system under the Immigration Act of 1924. One major change was that the reference census used was changed to that of 1890, which greatly reduced the number of Southern and Eastern European immigrants. Immigrants from most of the Western Hemisphere, however, were admitted outside the quota system (www.en.wikipedia.org). It is in this particular Act that the selection of new immigrants was merely based on racial grounds.

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 (the McCarran-Walter Act) was meant to revise the quotas again. This time the law based its quotas on the 1920 census. Nevertheless, immigrants from Ireland, the United Kingdom and Germany were still the most favored.

It was until the enactment of the Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments of 1965 (Hart-Cellar Act) that the system of national-origin quotas was eliminated. Certainly inspired by the movement of civil rights, the system, which heavily favored northern Europeans, had come under increasing questioning for it was considered to be racially biased. This new legislation established a new quota system of 20,000 from each country with a total of 170,000 immigrants allowed each year. One of the exemptions for the quotas was the one regarding reunification of families. Also, preference was given to people with professional skills needed in the United States. This led to an important increase in the number of immigrant workers from all over South Asia. In this

counterweight of needs, Handlin very assertively considers that in “general, immigrants came when they were needed and stayed away when they were not. Before quota restrictions were imposed, immigration was large in periods of full employment, small in times of unemployment” (202).

Ever since the breakthrough of the Immigration Act of 1965, immigration regulations have not gone thru significant changes, but they have acquired new causes. In the next chapter, the Immigration Act of 1986 will be analyzed, since it is essential to the Mexican immigration experience.