



## INTEGRATING AMERICA: AN INSIGHT INTO AN ETHNOCULTURAL SOCIETY AND THE ORIGINS OF A NEW SYSTEM OF ETHNIC RELATIONS

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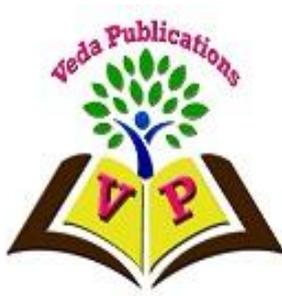
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### ABSTRACT



The nineteenth century stands as a hard turmoil period for Americans with regard to the issue of cultural assimilation. Requiring a national unity, the American process of cultural assimilation faces the challenge of theory and reality: the ones of hypocrisies, dualisms and double standards of ethnic and cultural forces in presence. The effort of entertaining sets of beliefs, applying them selectively to different situations, the capacity to minimize, ignore and defuse contradictions, hits the bloc of power localization which results in the birth of new systems of ethnic relations. The American kind of multi-ethnic melting pot worked but did not prevail to reach the target of the relatively restrictive national consciousness of Americans themselves.

**Keywords:** *Nineteenth Century - Assimilation - National Unity - Melting Pot.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The commonly-shared types of the American character shed broad light on its melting-pot distinction with regards to the multiplicity of peoples who happened to make of the "Promised Land", their second homes. Coming from diverse horizons, characterized by specific homeland cultures and bound to sink differences for a more comfortable life in America, one of the first challenges to face was the problem of assimilation which, according to the American heritage dictionary, is defined as the process whereby a group, as a minority or immigrant group, that gradually adopts the characteristics of another cultures<sup>1</sup>. The prospect of mixing-up many cultures within the angle of one-nation building bloc brought about obliterating local or tribal identities of some people whereas the persistence of racial and national groupings of others remained valid but not consistently: here comes to be at stake, another facet of the American paradox.

The baffling of inconsistencies noticed throughout the American history reveals in the open air the case of assimilation that lay-people may appreciate as a little concern in nineteenth-century. Yet, speaking of assimilation as a problem within the range of that period of time in America is, in an important sense, to definitely indulge in anachronism: an outdated issue, tackled in the wrong period of history. Meanwhile, the nineteenth-century Americans granted little interest in calamitous divisions in their society along racial and ethnic lines. From Europeans down to other races and mainly minorities, the issue of assimilation was differently apprehended, approached within any other perception except being a threat or a source of societal handicap to development.

Instead, late and only toward the end of the century did ethnic mixing arouse a sustained and striking sense of danger while giving birth to an uprising crisis. Did this create any consciousness among major European groups or among minorities? Did it provoke any social havoc in the established ethnic relations? If any, how did the whole community handle the matter in the perspective of interest-safeguarding and proffering solution-approaches to possible consequences? – Describing at

depth the ethnic and cultural system of the nineteenth century while digging out the fundamental origins of a new system of ethnic relations may help grasp a clear understanding of the nineteenth ethnic mixing in America.

## ASSIMILATION: EARLY INSIGHTFUL CONSIDERATIONS IN THE NATION-BUILDING PROCESS.

The acute consciousness of assimilation as a social problem which marked a great crisis in ethnic groups in America stems from some important considerations worth being addressed at its own stakes. Knowing that its existence greatly impacts in one way or the other on the life of Americans in many fields, it will be necessary to give some account of assimilation as a process in earlier decades.

In such a respect, we may remark in passing that the inevitable existence, merging, and incorporation of peoples have occurred on many levels in the United States, not just on the level of nation-building that historians and politicians usually bear in mind when they speak of assimilation. Undoubtedly, because referring to the modes of invasion of people coming from everywhere that the most impressive instances of assimilation in American history are to be found in the formation of racial or national minorities from more particularistic antecedents. Examples for illustration are many enough which, the following. The African slaves imported into the English colonies in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were a real medley of peoples, differing widely in appearance, traditions, and language. In their own minds, as all new in a land not of their own making they belonged to distinct tribes, not to a race. Let's notice that their English masters threw them together quite indiscriminately, however, and knowingly gave them a single, inclusive name: Negroes. Referring to that, the plantations of the colonial South functioned as a remarkable melting-pot in which distinctions between Mandigoes, Ibos, Angolans, and other African peoples were largely obliterated.<sup>2</sup> Under another fact, partly because English masters attributed a common identity to them and partly because certain common socio-cultural themes in West African cultures facilitated their amalgamation in spite of disparate

<sup>1</sup> The American Heritage Dictionary, Second College Edition, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 182. p135.

<sup>2</sup> Gerald Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (New York, Harper Publisher), p.82.



languages and customs,<sup>3</sup> the Afro-Americans progressively became a single people in spite of enormous differences in their circumstances and their drastic exposure to Anglo-American influences of many kinds.

Even though it is broadly assumed that slaves present in many regards the most highlighting example, it is curiously true that a similar process of assimilation entered into the making of major European ethnic groups as well. In fact, most of the peasants and villagers who came to the United States in the nineteenth century brought with them very little sense of having belonged to a nation, a new one that would be of many consequences. At first as it could be clearly apprehended, they thought of themselves as the peoples of a particular local area: a village or at most a province. In other words, contrary to the knowing of common lay people, they were not Germans but Wurttembergers, Saxons and Westphalians; not Italians but Neapolitans, Sicilians, Calabrians, and Genoese; not Chinese, but members of particular districts and clans.<sup>4</sup> Very quickly in most cases, slowly in few, these above mentioned but localized attachments were consequently submerged within the wider identities we generally know today: identities that surely demonstrate the special respect Americans have granted to the principle of nationality as a basis of social identification while creating other major impacts that are not known to the general public. Seeing this as a very successful intermediate level of assimilation, which the renowned American historian Victor Greene called "ethnicization", and considering the higher level on which an overarching American consciousness has formed, there is still a more confusing and complicated situation to shed light on. In fact, it could be noticed at the same time a huge amount of inter-ethnic assimilation which definitely occurred in the experience of individuals. While the emerging ethnic groups of nineteenth-century America were crystallizing due to the cultural merging character of the land where they found welcome, each of them was gradually losing highly

mobile families who changed significantly because objects to inter-cultural influences. Casting off the old ways and the old identities, they became in speech and manners indistinguishable from the native white population, and progressively faded into it. This can plainly be proved as it is the case with John Higham who demonstrated this in a revised edition of his book entitled *Send These To Me: Immigrants in Urban America*, that cultural mixing impact in the following words:

...in the south, for example, many German Jews in the nineteenth century were so fully accepted into the white society that their descendants ceased to be Jewish. Meanwhile, in the North, miscegenation and mobility made possible a continual, silent passing of light-skinned Negroes across the color line. According to a black physician in 1844, at least six of his former classmates at the New York African Free School were then living as Whites.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, it was a common notice that entire groups lost much of their distinctiveness in the course of time. As case of illustration, the upper New York State stood as a place of irrefutable evidence. The great diversities or oppositions between the old Dutch settlers and incoming Yankees from New England moderately softened. The nineteenth century welcomed and witnessed a cluster of cultural mixing-up of diverse sorts. The French Huguenots in New Rochelle and elsewhere generally retained little more than their own names to mark their origin.<sup>6</sup> Still in the same vein, by the end of the nineteenth century, the Irish Catholics, though they continued to be intensively distrusted in New England found sufficient welcome elsewhere. They were warmly accepted and well established so that comic magazines no longer felt free to portray them as

<sup>3</sup> Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*. (New York, Hopkins Press), p.30.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan D. Sarna *From Immigrants to Ethnicity: Toward a New Theory of Ethnicization*. (New York, Links and Company), p.370.

<sup>5</sup> John Higham, *Send These to Me: Immigrants in Urban America* (London: Hopkins University Press, 1975), p.177.

<sup>6</sup> James Fenimore Cooper, *Notions of the Americans* (New York: Harper Publishers, 1828), pp.305-306.



drunken louts with the faces of gorillas.<sup>7</sup> Actually, in the twentieth century, the crumbling of the great German-American community is in the eyes of many the most familiar and outstanding case of collective assimilation whereas many related aspects to American inter-cultural experience deserved being explained for the cause of fuller comprehension.

To some extent as it could be felt, a multi-ethnic melting pot undoubtedly worked in America but so inconsistently and incompletely that it did not prevail in terms of embracing many others both of the same kind or not. Meanwhile, virtually all of the local or tribal identities that people brought with them from other lands have been wiped out in the moment when every one of the racial and national groupings that was created in America has defiantly persisted. Under such a consideration, one may view the above development as an outright failure of assimilation. Instead, it would be nice to sort out from peculiar contradictions the process of assimilation exposed than the need to focus on an apparent failure to make merge tribal identities and racial groupings. This could significantly help grasp meaningful insights in comprehending American nineteenth-century facets about assimilation.

#### **ABOUT AMERICAN PROCESS OF ASSIMILATION: BETWEEN THEORY AND REALITY**

The process of assimilation displayed some specific contradictions in the effort of its implementation within the American context of nineteenth century. Many voices were heard about the issue in a variety of ways, approaching it through the lens of different apprehensions. Prominent historians, political sociologists and ethno-cultural specialists happened to widen up the scope of the American assimilation process about the contradiction it makes between theory and reality.

The theory of assimilation, as put forward in the Revolutionary era by Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur, a renowned French specialist of American history and mainly about the American character, seemed to allow no exceptions regarding identities of people living in the New World. << Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of

men>><sup>8</sup> vividly declared this wandering Frenchman. By the means of such an affirmation, the author smoothly magnifies the range of implications the issue of assimilation encompasses. As long as the American Revolution was appreciated along with the implementation of European innovative initiatives by Americans in their own national profit, the enlightenment as it should be called, gave birth to highlighted viewpoints and interpretations from American men of letters in many fields including the one of assimilation which stands as a subject that embodies the whole nation, excepting none of its ethno-cultural links. The Revolutionary belief that America offered a new start for mankind procured interesting implications or connotations from many authors. Diverse classical sources fuelled the debates over such overtones both with personal comments and standpoints waving between theory and reality.

Herman Melville reveals one in his persisting standpoints on American immigration in broad term and the great migration of Europeans in a specific concern. Watching German emigrations boarding ships for America, he mused this:

We are not a nation, so much as a world.....Our ancestry is lost in the universal paternity; and Caesar and Alfred, St. Paul and Luther, and Homer and Shakespeare are as much ours as Washington, who is as much the world's as our own. We are the heirs of all time, and with all nations we divide our inheritance. On this Western Hemisphere all tribes and peoples are forming into one federated whole; and there is a future which shall see the estranged children of Adam restored as to the old hearthstone in Eden.<sup>9</sup>

In view to the way the American nation is pictured through Herman Melville's words, the melting pot character seems evident and cultural multiplicity stands as a distinguishing criterion of the New World in general. The gains of diversity, opposition and controversy were already sown in the

<sup>8</sup> Moses Rischin, *Immigration and the American Tradition* (Indiana : Napolis Inds,1976),p.26.

<sup>9</sup> Philip Rahv, *Discovery of Europe : The Story of American Experience in the Old World*(Boston: Menphis Editions,1947),pp.137-138.

<sup>7</sup> John Higham, *Strangers in the Land : Patterns of American Nativism,1860-1925.*( New Jersey: New Brunswick House,1955),p.86.



American salad bowl as we may be tempted to view it. Not just basing on a simple imagination but referring to the American national experience with a particular regard to the growth of American thought in tight connection with European lifestyles, Oliver Wendell Holmes describes his compatriots as << the Romans of the modern world --- the great assimilation people>>. <sup>10</sup> This was not enough for George Bancroft in pinpointing that critical part of the American immigration and socio-cultural implications on national perspectives. He, the first great historian of the United States declared: <<Our country stands... as the realization of the unity of the [human] race>> <sup>11</sup>. As matter of fact, holding a stand on the preceding considerations, it may be safe to affirm that white Americans had mere intention of translating a national myth into a literal command. On the subject, even the most radical abolitionists did shrink from the hard accusation that they were dutifully promoting an amalgamation of races in the American land. In spite of that, some kinds of assimilation did bridge the gap between blacks and whites; and the relations of both blacks and whites with other minorities varied intensively. Eventually, in the face of that interwoven cultural connection, what needs to be explained is not a simple opposition between theory and practice but rather a baffling mix of inconsistencies.

Let's just refer to Indians as a case of illustration. Focusing for instance on how white Americans behaved and felt toward the Indian tribes, there is great reason in recording inconsistencies about the issue of assimilation and whatever it generates in terms of vague affirmation, opposition and dilemma. American general plans of actions toward minorities in broad terms projected varied expediencies. United States Indian policies, as one commissioner of Indian Affairs confessed, were hopelessly illogical. Judging by political calculations or positions, those policies highly proved inconsistent. In some situations, expediency led to a resort to warfare; in others it produced a mixture of subsidies and neglect. In still other situations, the federal government pursued a conscientious but often

misguided program of assimilation. <sup>12</sup> Private attitudes as many and diverse as we could figure out, proved unsteady ranging from a special respect for Indians to outright contempt. While some never demeaned or ridiculed Indians because they always appear in their eyes as human beings with a legitimate life of their own, it was not uncommon for upper class whites of both sexes to proudly claim descent from Indian ancestors. <sup>13</sup> Instead, in the 1870's a leading historian drew attention at fascination forebears had had with Indians while he publicly affirmed: << To us, of course, the American Indian is no longer a mysterious or even an interesting personage – he is imply a fierce dull biped standing in our way>>. <sup>14</sup> In regard to this, it is not unsafe to conclude that the American case of assimilation implies more than a field of concern.

Education stands as a serious question to be thrashed out if one intends to assess the American case of assimilation in its even unsuspected contours. Within the nineteenth century, education represents in the American context, another milieu in which paradox and contradiction highly abounded. Since Americans have always lived within the premises and manifestations of these social facts, they characteristically figured out the common school as the most essential instrument for molding a common citizenry. Viewing education of the young being the only organized effort the nation needed to make to promote assimilation, they definitely thought and fiercely set out to promote it nation-wide. But very soon, that prospect of assimilation hit the block with a kind of disastrous wind of change which did not help reach the target. Thus, many public schools promptly served contrary objectives that in fact had more to do with maintaining segregation or preserving minority cultures. The later ones were thought by minority groups to disappear if no serious steps were taken to instill their existence in people's minds and practices. In some parts of the country, control of the local schools gave ethnic minorities' substantial protection from the dominant culture. Allowing for no exceptions, the remark was not made in cities only. It

<sup>10</sup> Merle Curri, *The Growth of American Thought* (NewYork : Randon House, 1964),p.225.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans : The National Experience* (NewYork :Randon House ,1965),p.371.

<sup>12</sup> Francis P. Prucha, *Documents of United States Indian Policy* ( Nebraska:Lincoln Press,1975),p.138.

<sup>13</sup> Edward A. Freeman , *Some Impressions of the United States* ( New York , Randon House,1883),p.150.

<sup>14</sup> Moses C. Tyler , *A History of American Literature* ( New York : Norton Press,1878),p.10.



constantly affected rural areas where minorities seized the opportunity to fill a cultural gap they viewed, was demeaning them since a time. In rural areas of the Middle West where Germans predominated in huge number, some public schools were taught mainly or even entirely in the German language – a practice that aroused a kind of objection or notice of misunderstanding just before the 1890's<sup>15</sup>. This reaction is undoubtedly a result of what minority culture cannot support from abiding with dominant culture through the channel of education as a way of disappearing smoothly minority characteristic traits in America. The case of Middle West with Germans is far from being the only case of disenchantment toward that American assimilation policy. That cultural code of conduct provokes upheavals on one side but support on another, projecting into the open many other contradictory facets in implementing that approach.

In many other parts of the country, assimilation through education was vigorously supported as a national goal but severely qualified in local practice. It was a common notice that nowhere in America was public education stronger, or zeal for social integration greater anywhere than in New England. Instead, New England stands as a gem instigating contradictions. During the post - civil war decades, New England educators and reformers seized the opportunity of such an approach and threw themselves into campaigns to inculcate the ex-slaves of the South, the Indians of the Great Plains, and the Chinese of California with the knowledge and the values they would need to become effective participants in a free society.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, these same Englanders showed at the same time scant interest in assimilating the French Canadians. In addition, like the Chinese, the French resisted the culture and society they encountered in the United States and did not send their children to public schools while others knowingly allowed their own school-attendance laws to go unenforced. The approach of assimilation by the means of education seems to bring more havoc than it could solve.

The nineteenth century America witnessed a glaring contrast in terms of a distinctive combination in American culture of jealous localism and universalistic beliefs. Understand by localism, both a condition and an attitude: a condition of decentralization, enabling towns and other local districts to be largely autonomous communities and a reinforcing attitude that such autonomy is the key to liberty. These local settlements were at the beginning thought to make flourish a nation with flying colors but contrary to that very motivation and national target to reach they brought much more disdain than happiness to enjoy. The settlements from which the United States really emerged, shared nothing more than an animus against remote and consolidated power. The system of localism represents one of the local assimilation policies whose impacts remain quite indelible in the American history as a whole and more specifically about American ethno-cultural mixing-up. Localism separated to a high degree colonies and towns far from one another, few people travelled from one province to another and colonists sometimes felt remote from their own provincial capitals. It could be easily noticed that in every colony the revolutionary impulse sprang from a profound suspicion of consolidated power.<sup>17</sup> Even with the establishment of the new government which took over a decade before patriots of 1776 could bring themselves to create it only with great difficulty and reluctance, it merely stabilized and perpetuated the traditional dispersal of power. The high rate population spread over the territory, few were employed, very few found refuge or simply resided in raw little banks of towns and many others were scattered across the country and beyond or concentrated in the tiny post offices. On such considerations, it would not be unfair to say that the United States government in the nineteenth century consisted during peacetime mostly of post offices, some little local districts, and to conclude with Robert Wiede that America was << a society without a core >>.<sup>18</sup> Believing in his words, one could easily deduce the non-existence of a common cultural cord that would link all ethnic groups together, appropriate in

<sup>15</sup> Selwyn Troen, *The Public and the Schools: Shaping the St. Louis System, 1838-1920*. (New Jersey: Princeton, 1975), pp.55-78.

<sup>16</sup> Gunther Barth, *Bitter Strength : A History of the Chinese in the United States, 1850- 1870* (Massachusetts, Cambridge Press, 1964), pp.157-173.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Kelly, *The Cultural Pattern in American Politics : The First Century* ( New York: Hopkins , 1979), pp.31-80.

<sup>18</sup> Robert H. Wiede, *The Search of Order, 1877-1920* ( New York : Randon House , 1967), p.12.



paving the way for a cultural assimilation. The later one could appear as just a vain endeavor within the American context with a society, lost in the implementation of its own ideology. The point was deeply made and more colorfully by Henry James:

...No state, in the European word, and indeed barely a specific national name. No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country houses, nor parsonages, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great universities nor public schools – no Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society...<sup>19</sup>

The absence of a state which counts among America's shortcoming at a given time of her history when the issue of assimilation was at stake projected the intention that it was the most embracing of the symbols of legitimacy, the most fundamental of the structures of authority. In the eyes of many, a society which lacks that kind of state might have to do without all the rest: such was in fact the situation of the American republic which renders the case of assimilation as tough and complicated one, with a terrible social identity concern linking national groups and minorities as well. No doubt that nationalism acquires an ideological trust everywhere in America. Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that any other country happened to define itself so preeminently as a community of belief, a nation gathered just around a creed.<sup>20</sup> The relative abstractness of American patriotism due to the nonspecific and therefore universal aspect of American nationalism served a national ideology within the tangle of power localization as a mode of national unity and a channel of assimilation.

<sup>19</sup> Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institution and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: University Press, 1959), p.143.

<sup>20</sup> John Higham, *Hanging Together: Divergent Unities in American History* (New York: Hopkins University Press, 1974), p.19.

## NATIONAL UNITY AND POWER LOCALIZATION: THE IMPLICATIONS AT STAKE

The American integration implies the effectiveness of a national unity. In one way or the other, the later one steadily depends on the first one, no matter what it may engender in terms of diversity of ethnic groups, which are constantly exposed to cultural divergences or subject of dilemmas, oppositions and inconsistencies. The universal aspect of American nationalism, serving a heterogeneous society, paved the way to the localization of power as a golden way to a deep-rooted assimilation that could reflect or meet the American wish of the nineteenth century. Instead, it undoubtedly allowed innumerable separations to flourish within a matrix of national unity. It generated unsuspected changes which help understand how it permits an appropriate lead to a wide range of changes.

First, decentralization did encourage ethnic groups to function differently in different contexts. As a direct consequence of this, none of them or neither the powerful nor the weak could put forward a united front against the rest of society. Within this same remark, the dominant segment of the population was, of course, cut short or significantly handicapped in framing out an exclusive identity or maintains an exclusive preeminence, by the absence of a centralized state and its prerogatives. Still, referring to the European origin of these Anglo-Americans, one could see them in any other term than a miscellany of regional and local types: southerners and northerners, easterners and westerners, rural and urban folk, all intensively conscious of their differences from one another.

Alike but not the same, ethnic minorities in the United States could not fold arms or close ranks in a one-sided perspective of resistance to assimilation because they did not, as it was the case in Europe to confront a centralized state controlled by others. Mostly, ethnic groups might greatly hope to gain preponderance in particular localities. In case it happened to be the case, decentralized power came easily into their hands.<sup>21</sup> The system definitely worked for them but as a consequence, draw out their allegiance. Secondly, decentralization and devolution

<sup>21</sup> Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536 – 1966* (California: Berkeley Edition House 1975), p.27.



fostered in one go fostered the scattering of population. Appearing as one of the direct consequences, it enabled ethnic clusters or groupings to keep a certain distance from one another, mainly where economic competition could be intense. Widening and deepening the gap between ethnic clusters it could instead be widely felt another particular trait in the rank of the innumerable separations localization of power allowed. On the one hand, for a homogeneous people to have sprung from America's diversity there should be a highly extensive interaction between the subordinate groups in addition to the contacts each might have with the dominant majority. On the other, it is quite true that minority groups could not escape some involvement with one another in spite of the great extent to which ethnic groups in the nineteenth century kept away of one another's lifestyles. As matter of fact, where large concentrations of both groups materialized, they merged in widely separated divisions of the same city.<sup>22</sup> Thus, in a decentralized society, mutual avoidance fortunately or unfortunately checked both conflict and assimilation with another look at the American ideology. On the issue, John Higham declares:

The conditions that limited conflict between ethnic groups while promoting differences within each group were admirably suited to an ideological definition of America as a whole. A single canopy of beliefs made an otherwise loose-nit society of dissociated towns and neighborhoods comprehensible. Violations of the ideological norms could usually be understood as pragmatic adjustments to local realities rather than fundamental contradictions. Public schools could segregate minorities or preserve their cultures, depending on the particular ethnic accommodation in each locality, while all of them taught the same

promises of the American ideology.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to these huge disparities between a national ideology and localized institutions, there were also great controversies in grasping a fuller comprehension of what that ideology means in real sense. Seen as a profound fracture in the substance of the American ideology itself, the need for a commonly-shared understanding means more than a simple definition. With regards to the fact that any fully developed ideology naturally provides its believers with a collective image of them the American ideology missed the point significantly. It was profoundly split in such a respect, giving ways to many other considerations of contradicting character. On the one hand, it was widely acknowledged that nineteenth century Americans conceived themselves in the images which projected them as a cosmopolitan and unbounded people. Right on the other hand, the overwhelming majority in America being white Protestants whose culture and religion permeated American institutions offered another insightful consideration on the same issue. Focusing on this second and more parochial level of consciousness proved by white Protestants, they regarded the United States much more as a white man's country and as a Protestant country than any other ethnic or religious origin could happen to legally claim for the same belonging or paternity. Working on such a one-sided framework, they forwarded having no special name for themselves just because they were definitely the Americans and all others were outsiders even though on another level of consciousness, the same people took pride in the United States as an open and free society resting on universal, self-evident principles rather than any exclusive origins, a society dedicated to the separation of church and state and the elimination of all barriers to mobility and opportunity, a society of individual rather than groups. Such a state of contradictory stakes imposed in the nineteenth century another challenge to the American culture in general and to the American ideology appropriation in particular. A capacity to impartially entertain both of these sets of beliefs, applying them selectively to different situations and avoiding any ultimate reckoning by all manner of equivocation, evasion, and

<sup>22</sup> Olivier Zunz, *The Changing Face of Inequality: Urbanization, Industrial Development, and Immigrants in Detroit, 1880-1920* (Chicago: Elkins Editions, 1982), pp.50-59.

<sup>23</sup> John Higham, *Send These To Me: Immigrants in Urban America*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1975), p.186.



compromise, that capacity to minimize, ignore, and defuse the contradictions was essential to the stability of American society in the nineteenth century. Contradictions in nineteenth-century American culture revealed many new systems of ethnic relations. The image of a white Protestant nation as was viewed by white Protestants could be reconciled to the image of a universal homeland by identifying the former with the past and the latter with the future and then projecting as the nation's destiny, a gradual enlargement of one into the other. Furthermore, as idealists have put it, the American culture in all its contexts and considerations, expressed a basic truth of historical continuity: a reminder that the American identity has proved capable of enormous extension partly because it never required a drastic transformation, from its Anglo-Protestant beginning, the new society carried an evangelical and messianic outreach, which made possible its eventual conversion into a heterogeneous and cosmopolitan republic where lies once again the complex character of the American integration in relation with its multi-cultural demands. The relatively restrictive national consciousness of Americans going back to Puritan origins and the more embracing national consciousness usually attributed to Enlightenment went along with ambiguities and divisions around the opposing visions of a national community. How nineteenth century Americans dealt with opposing injunctions to be more practical suggested that this fundamental contradiction touched not only the problem of national identity but also other vital ethnic relationships.

With a specific reference to the main concern that is American assimilation, nineteenth century Americans developed no consistent theory of how they should behave in unison. The decentralization of society and the persisting disjunction of values and traditions made every alternative quite feasible and no one policy authoritative. With such societal considerations, issues at stakes could not crystallize and discontents could not converge. Consequently, ethnic crisis became unavoidable. Thus a general and prolonged upheaval in ethnic relations lasted a while but marked the breakdown of such a fact and the beginning of a new social order. A new facet of the American ethnic and cultural pattern came on stage with, announcing new systems of ethnic relations. The question of assimilation should then be apprehended within the angle of another parameter. In the eyes of many as I personally admit, based on the insights

mentioned above, the most evident indication of a fundamental change at the end of the nineteenth century was the interlinking of racial and religious tensions that had formerly been discrete. The formulation of a national program hit the bloc. It did not succeed in unifying Americans on the main issue due to its nonexistence. Through the lens of the progressive interpretation of the American history, James Hastings brings to light the following:

During the 1850's, for example, the Know-Nothing movement had been unable to formulate a national program. In the North Know-Nothings focused almost exclusively on foreign Catholics as the subversive element in American society. Southerners, living in dread of slave conspiracies and of abolitionists, were completely unresponsive to the Catholic issue. Californians, preoccupied with the problem of the Chinese, cared nothing about the phobias of the South or the fears of the Northeast; and the indifference was reciprocated. In contrast, the ethnic hostilities that developed around the beginning of the twentieth century acquired a more generalized character. One fed into another. Southerner whites became aroused for the first time about Catholics, Jews, and immigrants. Midwesterners and Far Westerners started to think of themselves as defenders of an America beleaguered on all sides. A sweeping rejection of all outsiders – of everyone who deviated from a conservative, Protestant, northerner European pattern gave a new, comprehensively ethnocentric meaning to the term "prejudice"<sup>24</sup>

In light of the above, it could conclusively be deduced that the conditions that had sustained the complex segmentation of the twentieth century no longer prevailed. This seriously affected the whole American society socially, economically, and culturally as well. The local community lost much of its autonomy, left Americans increasingly vulnerable

<sup>24</sup> James Hastings, *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethnics* (New York: Routledge Press, 1973), p.455.



to the intrusion of outsiders. Moreover, at the same time that the separateness of groups and localities diminished, the wall of separation between opposing values in American minds gave way as well. The shift away from localism became a must, appearing more obvious and familiar than any other social subject of that time. Interpretations of the political, economic, and cultural confusion openly highlighted as the critical change in American life along with the nineteenth century, a new awareness of interdependence in ethnic relations. Outside factors such as industrialization, bureaucracy, and specialized knowledge impacted in the one way or the other on the new trend of interdependence.

The significance of the local arena was drastically reduced due not only to the fact that national organizations interchanged an increasingly crowded terrain but also to the fact that more and more American people became integrated into economic networks and status hierarchies. On the international level, there was a common remark revealing that the world contracted alarmingly, and the entanglements of interdependence highly multiplied. The will of settling a state became a patent reality. This sufficiently geared up Americans, stimulated them to move outward into a larger, less provincial milieu even though this could also be threatening. In any of the alternatives, a consciousness of racial, national and ethnic differences dramatically intensified. The American ethnic relations offered another perception and understanding of its true but changing nature along with its progressive characteristics.

### CONCLUSION

The problem of assimilation in nineteenth century America is in one word, a concern of great distortion within the tangle of tragic divisions in the American society along racial and ethnic lines. This precious period of time in the history of Americans brings into the open not simply an outright failure of assimilation but rather the peculiar contradictions the process reveals itself.

The high rate of cultural diversity and divergences over social or cultural interests of Americans highlighted a complicated case of national identity. Consequently, ethnic hostilities acquired a more generalized character with an acute consciousness of assimilation that marked a great crisis in ethnic relations. Decentralization of society

and the disjunction of values stand as another cornerstone on the path of the American assimilation process. Since issues could not crystallize and discontents could not converge, the problem of assimilation could no longer be evaded in the nineteenth century which brings finally to the knowing of everybody the challenge that a divided heritage and an ambiguous, dualistic national identity seriously pose to the American people. Because ethnic relations tie up in new surviving endeavors in the progressive construction of the American society, a national synthesizing vision clearly expresses a basic truth. It is in fact a truth of historical continuity: a reminder that the American identity has proved capable of enormous extension, having required no drastic transformation. Ethnic relations expose boundaries between groups with different origins and distinct cultures in an open and free society which rests on universal, self-evident principles rather than any exclusive origins, a society of individuals rather than groups.

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