

## "Democracy Versus the Melting Pot," Horace Kallen, 1915

*Horace Kallen, a Jewish scholar and writer, began a decade of writing about the issues of American identity in the face of massive immigration with this piece, published in two parts, in The Nation. The full collection was published in 1924, as Culture and Democracy in the United States. During the time this article was published, America was receiving the largest influx of immigrants in history, and "Americanization" programs were one response to enabling the assimilation of so many diverse peoples into "American" culture, which Kallen insists is basically the Anglo-Saxon culture of New England. He saw the Americanization programs as being primarily in the interest of old Anglo-Saxon business classes and antithetical to the real spirit of democracy. In response to the "melting pot" image of the day, which Kallen rejects, he proposes "cultural pluralism." This essay also responds critically to a book by Edward A. Ross, The Old World in the New, describing the dangers lurking in massive immigration and advocating the halt of immigration—a view which eventually won out in 1924.*

All the immigrants and their offspring are in the way of becoming "Americanized" if they remain in one place in the country long enough—say, six or seven years. The general notion, "Americanization," appears to denote the adoption of English speech, of American clothes and manners, of the American attitude in politics. It connotes the fusion of the various bloods, and a transmutation by "the miracle of assimilation" of Jews, Slavs, Poles, Frenchmen, Germans, Hindus, Scandinavians into beings similar in background, tradition, outlook, and spirit to the descendants of the British colonists, the Anglo-Saxon stock.

...It is summed up in the contemporary representative "average" American of British stock—an individualist, English-speaking, interested in getting on, kind, neighborly, not too scrupulous in business, indulgent to his women, optimistically devoted to laissez-faire in economics and politics, very respectable in private life, tending to liberalism and mysticism in religion, and moved, where his economic interests are unaffected, by formulas rather than ideas. He typifies the aristocracy of America. From among his fellows are recruited her foremost protagonists in politics, religion, art, and learning. He constitutes, in virtue of being heir of the oldest rooted economic settlement and spiritual tradition of the white man in America, the measure and the standard of Americanism that the newcomer is to attain.

...To the dominant nationality in America, nationality, in the European sense, has had no meaning: for it had set the country's standards and had been assimilating others to itself. Now that the process seems to be slowing down, it finds itself confronted with the problem of nationality, just as do the Irish, the Poles, the Bohemians, the Czechs, and the other oppressed nationalities in Europe. "We are submerged," writes a great American man of letters, who has better than any one I know interpreted the American spirit to the world, "we are submerged beneath a conquest so complete that the very name of us means something not ourselves...I feel as I should think an Indian might feel, in the face of ourselves that were."

...It is in the shock of confrontation with other ethnic groups and the feeling of alienity that generates in them an intense self-consciousness, which then militates against Americanization in spirit by reinforcing the two factors to which the spiritual expression of the proletariat has been largely confined. These factors are language and religion. Religion is, of course, no more a "universal" than language. The history of Christianity makes evident enough how religion is modified, even inverted, by race, place, and time. It becomes a principle of separation, often the sole repository of the national spirit, almost always the conservator of the national language and of the tradition that is passed on with the language to succeeding generations. Among immigrants, hence, both religion and language tend to be coordinate: a single expression of the spontaneous and instinctive mental life of the masses and the primary inward factors making against assimilation.

...At the present time there is no dominant American mind. Our spirit is inarticulate, not a voice, but a chorus of many voices, each singing a rather different tune. How to get order out of this cacophony is the question for all those who are concerned about those things which alone justify wealth and power, concerned about justice, the arts, literature, philosophy, science. What must, what shall this cacophony become—a unison or a harmony?

...Immigrants appear to pass through four phases in the course of being Americanized. In the first phase they exhibit economic eagerness, the greed of the unfed. Since external differences are a handicap in the economic struggle, they 'assimilate,' seeking thus to facilitate the attainment of economic independence. Once the proletarian level of such independence is reached, the process of assimilation slows down and tends to come to a stop. The immigrant group is still a national group, modified, sometimes improved, by environmental

influences, but otherwise a solitary spiritual unit, which is seeking to find its way out on its own social level. This search brings to light permanent group distinctions, and the immigrant, like the Anglo-Saxon American, is thrown back upon himself and his ancestry. Then a process of dissimilation begins. The arts, life, and ideals of the nationality become central and paramount; ethnic and national differences change in status from disadvantages to distinctions. All the while the immigrant has been using the English language and behaving like an American in matters economic and political, and continues to do so. The institutions of the Republic have become the liberating cause and the background for the rise of the cultural consciousness and social autonomy of the immigrant Irishman, German, Scandinavian, Jew, Pole or Bohemian. On the whole, Americanization has not repressed nationality. Americanization has liberated nationality.

Hence, what troubles Mr. Ross and so many other Anglo-Saxon Americans is not really inequality; what troubles them is difference. Only things that are alike in fact and not abstractly, and only men that are alike in origin and in spirit and not abstractly, can be truly 'equal' and maintain that inward unanimity of action and outlook which make a national life. The writers of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were not confronted by the practical fact of ethnic dissimilarity among the whites of the country. Their descendents are confronted by it. Its existence, acceptance, and development provide one of the inevitable consequences of the democratic principle on which our theory of government is based, and the result at the present writing is to many worthies very unpleasant. Democratism and the Federal principle have worked together with economic greed and ethnic snobbishness to people the land with all the nationalities of Europe, and to convert the early American nation into the present American state. For in effect we are in the process of becoming a true federal state.

...We are, in fact, at the parting of the ways. A genuine social alternative is before us, either of which parts we may realize if we will. In social construction the will is father to the fact, for the fact is nothing more than the concord or conflict of wills. What do we will to make of the United States—a unison, singing the old Anglo-Saxon theme “America,” the America of the New England school, or a harmony, in which that theme shall be dominant, perhaps, among others, but one among many, not the only one?

...The common language of the commonwealth, the language of its great political tradition, is English, but each nationalist expresses its emotional and voluntary life in its own language, in its own inevitable aesthetic and intellectual forms. The common life of the commonwealth is politico-economic, and serves as the foundation and background for the realization of the distinctive individuality of each nation that composes it. The "American civilization" may come to mean the perfection of the cooperative harmonies of "European civilization," the waste, the squalor, and the distress of Europe being eliminated—a multiplicity in a unity, an orchestration of mankind.

As in an orchestra, every type of instrument has its specific timbre and tonality, founded in its substance and form; as every type has its appropriate theme and melody in the whole symphony, so in society each ethnic group is the natural instrument, its spirit and culture are its theme and melody, and the harmony and dissonances and discords of them all make the symphony of civilization, with this difference: a musical symphony is written before it is played; in the symphony of civilization the playing is the writing, so that there is nothing so fixed and inevitable about its progressions as in music, so that within the limits set by nature they may vary at will, and the range and variety of the harmonies may become wider and richer and more beautiful.

But the question is, do the dominant classes in America want such a society?

[From Horace Kallen, "Democracy Versus the Melting Pot," *The Nation* 100, no. 2590 (18-25 February 1915), 190-94, 217-220.]