

**Assimilation: The Ideal  
and the Reality** By B. A. Nelson, Ph.D

Assimilation of immigrant peoples into the prevailing culture of the United States has been variously envisaged at different epochs in the nation's history. Milton M. Gordon, in his *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins*, has defined three discrete stages in the development of this concept. The ideal of "Anglo-conformity," which "demanded the complete renunciation of the immigrant's ancestral culture in favor of the behavior and values of the Anglo-Saxon core group" prevailed almost until the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> It was superseded in the following two decades by the "melting pot" ideal, which heralded "a biological merger of the Anglo-Saxon peoples with other immigrant groups and a blending of their respective cultures into a new indigenous American type."<sup>2</sup> During the 1920s, the ideal of "cultural pluralism" came into vogue, postulating "the preservation of the communal life and significant portions of the culture of the later immigrant groups within the context of American citizenship and political and economic integration into American society."<sup>3</sup>

Although these three concepts of assimilation emerged in chronological order, this does not mean that one particular process of assimilation necessarily prevailed during one era of American history, to be displaced by another process and so forth. It is erroneous, therefore, to assume that nativist pressures towards "Anglo-conformity" were dominant from 1614, when Captain John Smith named his discovery "New England," until 1903, when Israel Zangwill published his play, *The Melting Pot*.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, it would be inaccurate to characterize the United States as being a "melting pot" of peoples from 1903 until 1924, when Horace M. Kallen coined the phrase "cultural pluralism" in his *Culture and Democracy in the United States*.<sup>5</sup> The three basic concepts are beliefs about what assimilation is or was or should be or should have been rather than accurate reflections of the reality of assimilation at any one time in American history.

It may be asked why these various concepts of assimilation should be considered at all. Rather, it would seem that all attention should be given to what assimilation really is or was. This suggestion would be unobjectionable were it not for the fact that a belief about assimilation may be more salient in determining public policy regarding immigration than is the reality of assimilation. In daily life, moreover, relations between natives and immigrants may be significantly affected by the ideal of assimilation which they do or do not hold in common, an ideal which may be perceived as inspiring, or threatening, or merely tolerable, depending upon the status of the individuals

involved. Finally, the extent to which natives or immigrants can identify with their nation -- their implicit answer to the question whether they live in "our nation," "this nation," or "their nation" -- is significantly determined by the ideal of assimilation, one which is also an ideal of national identity.

Assuming that the concepts of elite and masses have value in the interpretation of history, it can be argued that at least one ideal regarding assimilation, "Anglo-conformity," was diffused among the masses and even generated mass movements. Although the application of quantitative methods to the history of ideas awaits further refinement, it is known that there were significant numbers of members of nativist organizations and of subscribers to nativist publications during at least three periods in the nation's history.<sup>6</sup> The last such nativist upsurge involved a sizable percentage of both the nation's governing elite and its working masses. Restrictionist immigration legislation passed during the 1920s may have been the reaction of an elite to a perceived threat to their ideal of "Anglo-conformity," but it cannot be denied that at least one nativist organization during that period became a mass movement.

"Anglo-conformity" since the 1920s has neither found spokesmen in the governing elite nor inspired working class native Americans to band together in a new mass movement. Although the ideal of "Anglo-conformity" was implicit in the McCarran-Walter immigration act of 1952, which reaffirmed the principle of quotas for immigrants on the basis of their nations of origin, by 1963, when John F. Kennedy published his *A Nation of Immigrants*, virtually no member of the national governing elite defended "Anglo-conformity" as an all-encompassing ideal. The viewpoint typified by President Kennedy's book became official public policy with the immigration act of 1965, which abolished the national origins quota system. All subsequent legislation, up to and including the immigration act of 1986, has made official the view that the U.S. is a "nation of immigrants" in which "the Anglo-Saxon core group" is no more and no less "American" than any other.<sup>7</sup> Among both the elite and the masses, "Anglo-conformity" as an ideal has been almost wholly displaced by the "melting pot" ideal and, to a limited extent, the ideal of "cultural pluralism." Although the latter is still usually only a goal for the spokesmen of organized ethnic groups and a heuristic device for social scientists, it is increasingly the model of assimilation which is accepted by the young and the educated.

Cultural lag is, if anything, more evident in the diffusion of new ideas than of new technology. Obviously, there are limits to such inertia, to the extent to which past ideals have a mortmain on present realities. Thus, "Anglo-conformity" as an ideal could have political impact long after the "melting pot" ideal had come into vogue among the literati and social scientists, but total and widespread acceptance of "Anglo-conformity" would be an impossible anachronism in the 1980s, when the majority of the nation's immigrants come from Third World nations. Despite the glaring contradiction between the ideal of "Angloconformity" and the reality of contemporary immigration, one aspect of "Anglo-conformity" does, however, linger on as a phantom "residue," much like the whiff of scent which remains in a

long-emptied bottle. Although both leaders and the led know that “Anglo-conformity” has become an impossible ideal, both retain this one notion that has become a perennial source of solace whenever anyone dares to suggest that future immigration might challenge and deny the national premise of *e pluribus unum*.

This notion assures those who believe in it that, even if the “Anglo-Saxon core group” dwindles in numbers and power to the point of becoming marginal, the Anglo-Saxon political heritage will yet survive. According to the most optimistic exponents of this belief, the republic will endure even if the descendants of its founders go into extinction because it is based on an imperishable tradition going back to William Blackstone, John Locke, the Magna Charta, and Anglo-Saxon common law. Some supposed conservatives even affect to believe that this heritage will, paradoxically, be better defended by Third World immigrants than by immigrants from the nation which created that heritage.<sup>8</sup>

This last “residue” of belief in Anglo-Saxon superiority would be simply an innocuous illusion were there not indications that official public policy is moving in a direction directly contrary to the Anglo-Saxon political tradition. According to Milton M. Gordon’s “Models of Pluralism: The New American Dilemma,” precisely that is occurring.<sup>9</sup> The new American dilemma, as fateful as the one once addressed by Gunnar Myrdal, is the nation’s drift away from its tradition of “liberal pluralism,” in which “government gives no formal recognition to categories of people based on race or ethnicity,” and towards a new, “corporate pluralism,” which “envisages a nation where its racial and ethnic entities are formally recognized as such -- are given formal standing as groups in the national polity -- and where patterns of political power and economic reward are based on a distributive formula which postulates group rights and which defines group membership as an important factor in the outcome for individuals.”<sup>10</sup>

Corporate pluralism may be interpreted as the latest manifestation of cultural pluralism, but, unlike the liberal pluralism which emphasized acceptance of one political tradition by all ethnic groups, it disavows any pretense of assimilation. Corporate pluralism is, in fact, the opposite of the popular notion of assimilation as the disappearance of alien characteristics in an all-transforming native culture. Since corporate pluralism replaces “individual meritocracy” with “group rewards,” it strongly discourages assimilation because, as Gordon notes, “if a significant portion of one’s rational interests are likely to be satisfied by emphasis on one’s ethnicity, then one might as well stay within ethnic boundaries and at the same time enjoy the social comforts of being among ‘people of one’s own kind,’ ... moving across ethnic boundaries to engage in significant interethnic social relationships is likely to lead to social marginality in a society where ethnicity and ethnic identity are such salient features. Thus the logic of corporate pluralism is to emphasize structural separation.”<sup>11</sup>

As evidence that the new corporate pluralism is becoming official public policy, Gordon cites “recently introduced measures such as government-mandated affirmative action procedures

in employment, education, and stipulated public programs, and court-ordered busing of school children across neighborhood district lines to effect racial integration. As is widely known, the federal government has experienced difficulties implementing such measures with its present population. It is certainly not unreasonable, therefore, to expect that the present problems will only be exacerbated with the incorporation -- one cannot call it assimilation -- of masses of Third World immigrants. The balancing of the "group rewards" of one group against those of another has already given new life to inter-group hostilities and suspicions which many hoped had become dormant long ago.<sup>13</sup>

Optimists, however, can cite many gloomy forecasts from the past which failed to materialize. Forecasting is, admittedly, a hazardous enterprise, particularly when large groups of people are involved. As yet, it can be argued, there is no evidence that the American political heritage will not be transmitted intact to millions of new citizens from the Third World. Let it be admitted, therefore, that nothing can be proven about events in even the near future.

The testimony of the present and the past, however, is less subject to dispute. Evidence exists that, contrary to popular assumptions, the American political tradition has been very unevenly assimilated by at least two immigrant groups having a long history of residence in America. There is objective evidence of significant differences between these two major American nationality groups in their political values, levels of present political participation, and roles in American political history. Moreover, these two large groups -- Irish Americans and German Americans -- although distinct from one another in the areas cited, are ethnically closely related to the Anglo-Saxon core group.

That these two groups were and are almost as numerous as British Americans further underscores the significance of their distinctive political profiles. It is only to be expected that a nationality group having limited numbers and a shorter period of meaningful presence in American history might, through historical happenstance, follow a course of development divergent from that of the long-established and numerous Anglo-Saxons. Time and proximity to the latter might, therefore, reasonably be expected to bring about the assimilation of such a marginal group. That outcome cannot, however, as reasonably be expected when two ethnic groups almost as numerous and long-established as the core group continue to diverge from it in their political values, participation, and history. Such resistance to assimilation suggests the need for a radical reassessment of the very idea of assimilation itself.

The differences in political values among American ethnic groups are given a provocative examination in "Serfdom's Legacy: An Ethnic Continuum," published by Carmi Schooler of the National Institute of Mental Health in a 1976 issue of the *American Journal of Sociology*.<sup>14</sup> The abstract to the article sums up its wide-ranging thesis:

The effects of ethnicity appear to occur along a historically determined continuum which reflects the social, legal, economic, and occupational conditions of the European countries from which American ethnic groups emigrated. Ethnic groups with a

recent history of serfdom show the intellectual inflexibility, authoritarianism, and pragmatic legalistic morality previously found characteristic of American men working under occupational conditions limiting the individual's opportunity for self-direction. Although it is impossible to confirm each link in the causal chain, a model emphasizing the effects on ethnic groups' culture of historical conditions restricting the individual's autonomy seems a probable and parsimonious explanation of contemporary ethnic differences.<sup>15</sup>

According to Schooler, the major ethnic groups in America deriving from Europe can be ranked along a continuum which reflects the relative recency of the emancipation from serfdom of the peasantry in their countries of origin.<sup>16</sup> The continuum begins with Scandinavia, where serfdom was never established,<sup>17</sup> and proceeds to a midpoint with England, where serfdom was abolished in the period 1603-1625, and Ireland, where "Because of the hypothesized importance of a tradition of autonomy and personal responsibility, Ireland, which had been a dependency under the tight control of England, is given a place in the continuum directly below England."<sup>18</sup> The German states, where serfdom was abolished in the period 1807-1833, occupy a place just below the midpoint of the continuum, followed by southern and central Italy, where serfdom was abolished in 1848 as part of the abolition of serfdom in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and eastern Europe (Russia and Poland), where serfdom was abolished in 1861 by the ukase of Alexander II.<sup>19</sup>

Schooler further cites a number of authorities to demonstrate that not all serfdoms were comparable. The serfs of England, for example, endured a degree of subjugation not at all comparable to that suffered by the serfs in Russia, where the only difference between the serf and the American Negro slave was the former's privileges of "taking the oath of allegiance to the Tsar, paying a personal tax, and serving in the army."<sup>20</sup> The rankings of the continuum also reflect "the degree of economic independence of the peasantry."<sup>21</sup> Quoting Immanuel Wallerstein, Schooler notes that yeoman farmers were located primarily in northwest Europe and that they particularly prevailed in the Dutch republic and England, where they had relatively greater power than their German counterparts.<sup>22</sup> Not only was serfdom abolished earlier in northwestern Europe, but in that area serfs even in serfdom had before their eyes the example of an independent yeomanry.

In addition to this "opportunity for autonomy," the ethnic continuum reflects the "complexity of decision making open to the peasantry in different countries."<sup>23</sup> Livestock farming, which permits more decision making than arable farming, was more common in lands where serfdom was abolished earlier. Arable farming itself varied among countries, following a pattern demanding communal labor in countries where feudalism was longer entrenched, while sooner giving way to the "new agronomy," which demanded more individual initiative, in countries where feudalism was sooner abolished.<sup>24</sup> According to Wallerstein, during the period 1450-1640, when "capitalistic agriculture" was developing, a geographical division of agricultural labor took place. In the "core" area (northwest Europe and Germany west of the Elbe), agriculture became more intensive,

resulting in less coercion of the peasant. In the “semiperiphery” (southern Europe) and “periphery” (Europe east of the Elbe), modes of control of agricultural labor remained more authoritarian.<sup>25</sup> Ireland, despite its semicolonial relationship to England, was part of this “core” area; hence, according to Schooler, “However poor the condition of the Irish peasantry their subjugation. . . rarely reached the level found in Europe east of the Elbe River.”<sup>26</sup>

Schooler notes research indicating that “occupations characterized by closeness of supervision, routinization, or substantively simple tasks decrease both the intellectual flexibility of those working in them and their intellectually demanding use of leisure time.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, “persons living and working under such restrictive conditions . . . develop essentially authoritarian, conservative, and conformist attitudes toward authority.” They also fail to value “moral autonomy”: i.e., the individual’s ability to hold “himself responsible for maintaining and living up to an internalized set of moral standards.”<sup>28</sup>

Schooler sustains his hypothesis – “that the differences found among European ethnic groups in present-day America result from cultural values which are the residue of historical processes” -- with the results of interviews of 3,101 men conducted by the National Opinion Research Center in 1964.<sup>29</sup> The sample excluded Jews and was limited to whites who either were born in Europe or who had a parent or a grandparent born there. The interviews considered seven variables; two related to intellectual functioning (“intellectual flexibility,” “intellectually demanding use of leisure time”), two related to attitudes toward authority (“authoritarian conservatism,” “self-direction”), and three related to moral autonomy (“personally responsible morality,” “attribution of responsibility to self for control over one’s own fate,” “self-deprecation, the self-critical part of self-esteem”).<sup>30</sup>

The bulk of Schooler’s analysis demonstrates how results obtained confirm his hypothesis even when one accounts for the variables of age, father’s education, rurality, and region.<sup>31</sup> He concludes also that “ethnicity does have an effect distinct from that of adult social class.”<sup>32</sup> Generally, individuals from ethnic groups having a longer history of freedom from serfdom showed higher levels of intellectual functioning and self-directed, rather than conforming, systems of values.<sup>33</sup> Schooler’s conclusion is particularly noteworthy:

Belonging to an ethnic group with a long history of freedom from serfdom has the same general empirical relationship with intellectual functioning, attitude toward authority, and moral autonomy as does working in a substantively complex or self-directed job. Both conditions seem to produce persons who are intellectually more effective, who believe that they have some control over their lives, and who feel that the ultimate locus of ethical responsibility is within themselves, rather than in authorities, the law, or other external enforcers of conformity. The internalization of ethical responsibility of those from such ethnic groups also seems to limit their ability to shift the burden of their ethical responsibility onto others, thus tending to make them more self-critical.<sup>34</sup>

Of the seven variables Schooler considered, at least two, those

concerning attitudes toward authority, are obviously political values. "Authoritarian conservatism" is not necessarily acceptance of a "rightist" ideology; rather, it is a stolid, unthinking acceptance of whatever values are established by those who rule any society.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, a low sense of "self-direction" also renders an individual more amenable to unquestioning acceptance of authority. "Intellectual flexibility" and "intellectually demanding use of leisure time," which seem to be apolitical variables, are, in fact, the basic virtues of an informed citizen. The three factors coalescing in a sense of internalized "moral autonomy" are essential to the preservation of law and order in the absence of a high degree of governmental regulation and intervention. Obviously, a people not long removed from serfdom will both accept and need the rule of a strong, authoritarian state, while the obverse will be true of a people having in its ranks a large, independent yeomanry.

It may be supposed, however, that Schooler's thesis, even if otherwise validated, would prove to have little practical value in understanding the contemporary United States simply because it is limited to the always nebulous realm of values and attitudes rather than measurable behavior. However, at least one researcher, Andrew Greeley of the National Opinion Research Center, has studied one important area of behavior -- political participation -- and has concluded that ethnicity is "a meaningful predictor" of such behavior. Greeley's "Political Participation among Ethnic Groups in the United States: A Preliminary Reconnaissance," published in a 1974 issue of the *American Journal of Sociology*,<sup>36</sup> presents in its results, independently of Schooler, an ethnic continuum analogous to his. Greeley found significant differences in levels of political participation among major "religioethnic groups" in the U.S. even "when social class is held constant."<sup>37</sup> Moreover, "the diversity among such collectivities is of similar magnitude to the diversity found in various nations in cross-national studies."<sup>38</sup>

Working with a "weighted sample" of 3,095 Americans, Greeley considered the relationship of six predictor variables (religion, income, education, ethnicity, region, occupation) to four political participation variables (voting, campaigning, civic activity, particularized contact). He discovered that as a predictor ethnicity is "stronger than religion, region, and occupation for all four of the variables, equal to or stronger than income on two variables (voting and contact). It is the strongest predictor of both voting. . . and particularized contact, and in third place on both campaigning and civic activity."<sup>39</sup>

Making no allowance for the effects of social class and region, and combining all four political participation variables, Greeley found that on this "overall political participation scale," Irish Catholics scored 41 units; Scandinavian Protestants, 32; Jews, 19; and Polish Catholics, German Catholics, German Protestants, and Anglo-Saxon Protestants slightly more than 10.<sup>40</sup> He found that "The American Irish Catholics have the overwhelming lead on the political campaigning scale... . Indeed, their score is more than twice as large as that of the nearest group, the Scandinavian Protestants."<sup>41</sup>

Holding social class and region constant, Irish Catholics and Scandinavians were found to be more politically active than

Jews.<sup>42</sup> Allowing for regional factors (e.g., lower levels of political participation in the South) and social class produced the following scale of “overall political participation”:

Irish Catholics, 30.2

Scandinavians, 22.9

Anglo-Saxon Protestants, 7.5

German Protestants, 5.7

German Catholics, 4.5

Polish Catholics, 2.5

Irish Protestants, 0.7

Italian Catholics, —3.7

Jews, -9.9<sup>43</sup>

With the exception of unusually depressed standings for the Irish Protestants and, perhaps, the Italians, Greeley’s scale holding class and region constant parallels Schooler’s ethnic continuum. Schooler, of course, excluded Jews from his sample. Noting that “the Jews emerge as the least active of all the groups,” Greeley concludes that “at least as far as the Jews are concerned, the reason for their high level of general political participation is their social class.”<sup>44</sup> Greeley suggests that the low score of the Irish Protestants is due to their location almost exclusively in the South.<sup>45</sup> Correcting for the low level of political participation in the South slightly elevates the Anglo-Saxon score, but results in a drop in overall scores for German Americans, among others, who are revealed to be, in Greeley’s terms, “hypopolitical,” while Irish Catholics and Scandinavians retain their standings as “hyperpolitical” ethnic groups.

Greeley does not attempt to account for the low level of political participation among German Americans, but presents an interesting insight into the origins of the different levels of political participation among Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants. While the former settled in “large cities in the northeastern and north central part of the United States,” the latter “settled for the most part in the Piedmont area of the southeast, an environment where there was less political activity and where politics was not a path to affluence and respectability.” The Irish Catholics, however, in their urban environment, “discovered that involvement in politics in the United States was a way to respectability, power, and affluence.”<sup>46</sup> This pattern has not disappeared with subsequent generations. Greeley notes that “in the 1960s young men and women of Irish background graduating from college were one and a half times more likely than typical Americans to choose careers in government service and three and a half times more likely to choose careers in law.”<sup>47</sup>

In his *Ethnicity in the United States: A Preliminary Reconnaissance*, Greeley presents an additional explanation for the “hyperpolitical” standing of the Irish American. Noting that Irish Americans scored significantly higher than British Americans and Italian Americans on a scale designed to measure respect for the democratic process, he suggests that “It may well be that a thousand years of revolutionary tradition does generate a respect for political democracy, a respect that survives over the passage of a society into a bourgeois mentality.”<sup>48</sup>

Greeley argues that ethnic differences in political participation in some instances persist for several generations. He presents



evidence to refute the belief that all ethnic groups are equally assimilated into the American political process after a given number of generations. "The assimilationist theory would lead us to believe that the longer the immigrant family is in the country, the more likely it is to participate in political activity," but, Greeley finds, "the small correlations between generation and political participation for the Italians and the Irish are small indeed. By contrast, the relationship between generation and active political participation for Jews indicates that the assimilationist model may be relevant for them."<sup>49</sup>

The thesis that different levels of political participation among ethnic groups may be wholly explained by their differing times of arrival upon the American political scene is obviously in need of revision. While it is true that the great mass of Irish immigrants preceded the mass of German immigrants by perhaps a decade, this theory of precedence would not account for the high level of political participation quickly attained by the Scandinavians, the mass of whom immigrated at least a decade following the great wave of German immigrants. Moreover, German Protestants in Pennsylvania preceded the massive Irish Catholic immigration by more than a century. (This early "Pennsylvania Dutch" immigration largely contributed to the ancestry of the two leading German-American political leaders in U.S. history, Herbert Hoover and Dwight Eisenhower.)

Edward R. Kantowicz, writing on "Politics" in the *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, believes that differences between the political histories of the Irish and Germans in the U.S. are largely explicable in terms of conditions they met here upon their arrival. Ignoring the early "Pennsylvania Dutch" immigration, Kantowicz concludes that

A comparison of the Irish with the Germans, who arrived at the same time in America, is instructive. The Germans had a language barrier to overcome, and they lacked political experience in the fragmented German principalities they had left. On the other hand, most German settlers had more skill, larger cash reserves, and better economic prospects than the hapless famine Irish. Also, many Germans settled on farms far from the large cities and thus had neither reason nor opportunity to seek the favors of bosses or take advantage of the career possibilities offered by politics. So it was the Irish, not the Germans, who moved into the growing political machines of the mid-19th century.

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It is questionable, however, that all the differences can be explained by these factors. The Scandinavians also faced a language barrier and were even more rural in their patterns of settlement than were the Germans. Nonetheless, their level of political participation has been almost as high as that of the Irish. Moreover, it may be asked if the low level of German political participation was a consequence of *Kleinstaateri* in the old country or if the latter was a consequence of an entrenched feudalism which also accounts for the former.

The political history of the Irish (and, to a lesser extent, the Scandinavians) in the U.S. has been characterized by a refusal to accept the authority of the status quo, in sharp contrast to the political history of the German Americans, almost wholly a record of accommodation (and often obeisance) to the authority

of the status quo. It is suggested here that these persistent patterns are so deeply rooted, and still so much in evidence, that they must be explained as products of more than the circumstances encountered by newly arriving immigrants. Their disparate responses to those circumstances -- in the one instance a rejection of authority, in the other an acceptance of it -- can perhaps be as well explained as a product of Old World encounters with authority, specifically what Schooler terms "serfdom's legacy."

Kantowicz points to the source of Irish political activism in an Old World legacy with his observation that "Their experience in Ireland had made them both familiar with and contemptuous of Anglo-Saxon legal and political institutions... accustomed to viewing the official government as illegitimate, the Irish were prepared to step into extralegal organizations like the political machines of American cities."<sup>51</sup> Had serfdom lingered longer in the British realm, however, the Irish might have become inured to their subjugation much as the Russian peasant had become inured to his. In that case, the Irish response to New World politics might have been puzzlement and withdrawal, not the aggressive seizing of a liberating opportunity.

Although most Americans are apt to think of John F. Kennedy as the representative Irish-American politician, during much of the nation's history more typical figures were rebels, eccentrics, and demagogues such as Denis Kearney, Ignatius Donnelly, Father Charles E. Coughlin, Joseph R. McCarthy, and Eugene McCarthy. Here, again, the distance between the Irish and the Germans in their American political experience is strikingly apparent. While the German Americans may have succeeded in producing a Hoover and an Eisenhower to match the Irish Kennedy -- in statesmanship if not in charisma -- they have never produced a rebel even as significant as Kearney. (It is noteworthy, also, that Hoover and Eisenhower differed from the mass of German Americans not only in their having antecedents from the early immigration of the colonial period, but in coming from long lines of religious dissenters, Quakers and Mennonites respectively.)

The Scandinavians, according to Kantowicz's account, were "mostly yeoman farmers" who were attracted to the party of Lincoln because of its sponsorship of the Homestead Act. They favored the prohibition of alcoholic beverages, a quasi-radical position in the nineteenth century. The Volstead Act which put prohibition into effect in 1920 was named for Andrew Volstead, a Norwegian congressman from Minnesota. After 1900, the Scandinavians showed a radical propensity by becoming active in agrarian, third-party movements, notably the Non-Partisan League and the Farmer-Labor party. Kantowicz believes that they manifested an "independent, antiparty spirit derived from the early Republic. The Constitution made no mention of political parties, for the founding fathers hoped that parties would never take root. Though parties soon proved necessary, the antiparty sentiment never died and often led to splinter movements and third-party action."<sup>52</sup>

In strong contrast to the Irish and Scandinavian records of taking the initiative and seeking innovative reforms, the record of German-American politics has been one of mere reaction to

the initiatives of other groups, when it has not been a simple accommodation to them. This is evident if one briefly reviews the history of German-American politics from the pre-Civil War period down to the years immediately following World War II.

Although historians have given much attention to the unrealized ambitions of the *Giessener Gesellschaft* and the ideological concerns of the “Forty-eighters,” LaVern Rippley cites in his *The German-Americans* evidence that their impact was quite negligible.<sup>53</sup> Kantowicz concludes that it is a “myth that the German settlers in the Midwest were strong opponents of slavery and that their massed voting strength was decisive in electing Abraham Lincoln.... The whole slavery issue was rather remote from the average German settler and did not touch him personally the way prohibition, nativism, and sabbatarianism did.”<sup>54</sup> Rippley agrees that “the issues of prohibition and nativism influenced the German vote in 1860 far more than did all the pro-Lincoln Forty-eighters.”<sup>55</sup>

Even in cities and states where the Germans comprised a majority of the population, they were disinclined to translate their numbers into political power. Rippley notes that “The nationally acclaimed German city of Milwaukee was unable to elect a German-born mayor until 1884, and the Wisconsin legislature never had more than a few German-born members... except for Carl Schurz, no German from Wisconsin ever gained national prominence during the nineteenth century.”<sup>56</sup>

When unusually large numbers of German voters took part in elections late in the nineteenth century, they were reacting to the initiatives of other groups, not seeking political power in a positive sense. Kantowicz observes that “The first abnormal election for the Germans occurred in 1890. Illinois and Wisconsin had passed laws prohibiting the use of any language but English in the schools. In Nebraska and other midwestern states antiliquor agitation and a resurgent nativism appeared. All of these forces of moralistic Protestantism, centered in the Republican party, threatened the interests of Germans in the Midwest and produced heavy Democratic votes.”<sup>57</sup>

The anti-Democratic landslide vote in the elections of 1920 is often cited as evidence of German-American political power, but, again, it was a reaction to an initiative seized by others. What is remarkable in German-American politics during the period from 1890 to 1920 is not the shift of German voters from the Democrats to the Republicans but the lack of real resistance to the movement to suppress use of the German language in public and private schools and other areas of American life. In 1910 there were 9,000,000 speakers of German in a total U.S. population of only 92,000,000, the overwhelming majority of whom were concentrated in a few states in the Midwest; yet, in a few years use of German as a language of instruction was outlawed in state after state. Rippley finds this a unique instance of the suppression of an ethnic culture: “Without question some nine million German speakers were linguistically eliminated within a mere fifty years, and perhaps they benefitted economically in the process. It seems unlikely that any other nationality group of equal numerical strength has ever before been so completely and so quickly absorbed in any country on the globe.”<sup>58</sup>

What is remarkable about the outlawing of German in the schools by the legislature of Wisconsin in 1890 is not the fact that German voters were moved to reject the nativist-leaning Republican party, but that such legislation had even been enacted. As late as 1980, after decades of migration into the state by non-Germans from the South and elsewhere, persons of German descent, according to the reports of the U.S. Bureau of the Census, comprised 56 percent of the population. Other states outlawing the use of German as a language of instruction in the schools included Iowa, Nebraska, South Dakota, Indiana, and Ohio, states having, respectively, 53 percent, 52 percent, 52 percent, 42 percent, and 41 percent of their populations of German descent as of 1980.<sup>59</sup> German, as a subject and/or as a language of instruction, was also suppressed by law in states (e.g., Texas, Louisiana, Massachusetts) having small minorities of Germans in their populations, as might have been expected.<sup>60</sup> What remains less understandable -- unless one assumes a readiness among German Americans to accept the dictates of authority -- is the lack of resistance to the suppression of their culture in states in which they comprised either a majority or a heavy plurality of the population.

Although German Americans were often effective organizers, their efforts were less political than social. The *Deutsch-Amerikanische Nationalbund*, founded in 1901, claimed at its peak in 1916 over 3,000,000 members, making it the largest organization of any ethnic group in American history. But it failed to translate these numbers into political power. According to Rippley, "Despite a triumph of numbers, the alliance's effectiveness was illusory. Its success rested on several supporting coincidences. . . the German press promoted it as a means to sustain its own readership. More significantly . . . the brewing industry . . . lavishly supported the alliance as a means of counterattacking prohibition."<sup>61</sup> Basically, the alliance grew in reaction to the Anti-Saloon League and the Prohibition Party. Faced with the political challenge of mobilizing opposition to the drift towards U.S. intervention in what became World War I, it failed.

The distance between claimed influence and the reality of political impotence was even more marked in the case of the *Deutschamerikanische Volksbund*, the spearhead of German-American resistance to U.S. intervention in the conflict that became World War II. Congressman Samuel Dickstein warned that the Bund had 450,000 members; Fritz Kuhn, Bund leader, boasted of 230,000; Martin Dies, Congressional investigator of un-American activities, revealed that it had 100,000. In reality, according to secret reports filed with their superiors by two quite disparate observers -- J. Edgar Hoover of the FBI and Hans Dieckhoff, German ambassador to the U.S. -- the Bund had approximately 6,500 members, many of whom were Irish Coughlinites.<sup>62</sup>

If a German-American voting bloc existed after 1945, it could only be discovered indirectly, for no one German-American organization enrolled more than a few thousand members. Samuel Lubell, in his *The Future of American Politics*, published in 1956, surmised that isolationist sentiment in certain counties in the Midwest and their postwar shift to the Republicans in the election of 1952 were causally linked to their having predominantly

German populations.<sup>63</sup> However, since a “German vote” was even then difficult to detect, it is not surprising that after Lubell the German American received little attention in studies of the “politics of ethnicity.” When, in 1972, Mark R. Levy and Michael S. Kramer published their *The Ethnic Factor: How America’s Minorities Decide Elections*, they gave a lengthy chapter to the Irish, among other groups, but almost omitted any mention of the Germans.<sup>64</sup> When Michael Novak in the same year published his *Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*, not only were German Americans not to be found among the “unmeltables,” but they were assigned by Novak to the oppressive “Anglo-Teutonic” majority.<sup>65</sup> By the 1980s almost no one ventured to support the notion that a German political bloc then existed in the U.S.

It is difficult to believe, after even a brief survey of the relevant facts, that the “hypopolitical” status of the German Americans has been wholly a product of their experiences in America. The Germans, as noted earlier, were liberated from serfdom only fifty years before the Slavs of eastern Europe. Moreover, their experiences as peasants were closer to those of the Slavs than to those of the Scandinavians, Dutch, British, and Irish. It is, therefore, not unreasonable to surmise that the Germans brought with them to America an attitude toward authority which was radically different from that of the Irish, for example. The Germans remained “hypopolitical,” as they had been forced to be in the Old World, while the Irish, reacting against British oppression in the Old World, seized on the liberating dimension to their oppressors’ (Anglo-Saxon) political tradition and denied its conservative aspects, becoming “hyperpolitical.”

The implications for American history of the “hyperpolitical” achievements of the Irish are not readily apparent. However, the “hypopolitical” position of the Germans facilitated their “assimilation” through their passive acceptance of a legal and extralegal suppression of their culture. Thomas J. Archdeacon, in his *Becoming American: An Ethnic History*, suggests, in the following, the fateful significance of this German acquiescence: “. . . the blatantly repressive actions taken during World War I against the propagation of German culture in the United States . . . did not directly inculcate an American culture. They did, however, undermine the only European group that had ever enjoyed the numerical strength, prosperity, high racial status, and ties to a powerful homeland needed to sustain in the United States a culture competitive with the British.”<sup>66</sup>

If such wide divergences have appeared in the ways that Irish and German immigrants have “assimilated” the Anglo-Saxon political tradition, then even greater anomalies can be expected when the United States becomes the host country to truly massive numbers of Third World immigrants. Asia has an enduring heritage of not simply feudalism, but of that Oriental Despotism, masterfully analyzed in Karl Wittfogel’s thus named book, which has shown a capacity to overwhelm liberalizing Western tendencies.<sup>67</sup> Japan, supposedly a parliamentary democracy, has given evidence -- not limited to the controversial statements of Prime Minister Nakasone -- of being one of the most ethnocentric nations in the world.<sup>68</sup> China remains a one-party state. The parliamentary democracy of India may not

survive an internecine warfare among the subcontinent's linguistic and religious power blocs. The future of democracy in the Philippines is very uncertain. The recent massacres in Cambodia have only ideologically motivated apologists to distinguish them from the depredations of Tamerlane. Latin America is, with few exceptions, a congeries of military dictatorships in which *el caudillo* follows *el golpe de estado*, and vice versa, in a succession without end. The one notable exception to this pattern, Costa Rica, is really a European colony, and probably will not endure much longer. Democracy is, if anything, in even more disarray in Africa. The one nation having a history of democratic forms, Liberia, fell to a military dictatorship several years ago.

After even a cursory survey of the Third World, anyone can see that only a foolish ethnocentrism can account for the fond belief of many Americans that their political heritage, -- imperfectly received in the past by immigrants from nations having cultures closely related to that of the nation's founders-- will in the future transform and overwhelm all that is alien. Such a universal constant, which such a heritage would have to be, can exist in natural history, but not in political history.

#### Notes

1.(New York: Oxford University Press, 1964). P. 85.

2.Ibid.

3.Ibid.

4.Although he did not employ Zangwill's metaphor, the "melting pot" ideal, the faith that a new man, the American, would emerge from a New World panmixia of the world's peoples, was championed as early as 1782 by Hector St. John Crèvecoeur in his *Letters from an American Farmer*. See Gordon, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

5.As in the instance of the "melting pot" ideal, the ideal of "cultural pluralism" probably found a popular currency long before it was expounded as such. Certainly, the many distinctive, often peculiar sects which flocked to the United States as a refuge from the time of the nation's independence, if not earlier, saw in the new nation the tolerance for their beliefs implicit in the plurality of its cultures, albeit that they, of course, knew nothing of the vocabulary of twentieth century social science.

6.See John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism 1860-1925* (New York: Atheneum, 1972), *passim*. In 1894 the American Protective Association had 500,000 members (p. 81). By April, 1915, after three years of publication, *The Menace*, strongly opposed to the "new immigration," had 1,507,923 subscribers (p. 184L). At its height of influence in 1923, the Ku Klux Klan had at least 3,000,000 members, was organized in 42 states, and enrolled an average of 1,000 new members each day (pp. 285-297).

7.That this view is not limited to liberals is evidenced by the following statement by a prominent "neoconservative": "Only those who do not understand America believe that families that have been here for 10 generations are more American than the tens of thousands of new citizens naturalized last year." Jeane Kirkpatrick, "We Need the Immigrants," *The Los Angeles Times*, 30 June 1986, Sec. A.

8.For typical expressions of this point of view, see Kirkpatrick, *op. cit.*, and Tom Bethell, "What Immigration Crisis?" *The American Spectator*, Aug. 1984, pp. 9-11. Bethell believes that immigrants from the

Third World are preferable to those from Europe “because they are the ones who will appreciate the country, will defend it and perpetuate it. University-educated Europeans are now of dubious value, if you ask me. They are inclined to think that America would be fine if only it were more like Europe. Which is exactly what we *don't* want” (p. 9).

9. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 454 (Mar. 1981), 178-188.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 185.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

13. An example of a recently burgeoning problem of this nature is the “reverse discrimination” now being suffered by Asian Americans seeking admission to prestigious universities and colleges. See “Some Fear Colleges Use Quotas to Limit Admissions,” *New York Times*, 3 Aug. 1986, Sec. 12, p. 22; “Asian Students Fear Top Colleges Use Quota Systems,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 19 November 1986, p. 1.

14. 81 (May 1976), 1265-1286.

15. p. 1265.

16. p. 1266.

17. p. 1267. Schooler’s authority for this statement is Gwatkin and Whitney in the 1957 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*

20. p. 1268. Schooler here quotes Jerome Blum, *Lord and Peasant: Russia from 9th to 19th Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 468-469.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.* See Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System: Capitalistic Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press, 1974), pp. 87, 177, 239-250.

23. p. 1270.

24. pp. 1268-1269. The pattern of communal labor was particularly pronounced in feudal Russia and was noted by Marx and Engels in their preface to the 1882 Russian translation of their *Communist Manifesto*. See Arthur Rosenberg, *Democracy and Socialism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), p. 238.

25. Schooler, pp. 1270-1271. See Wallerstein, pp. 87-91, 100-102, 116, 281, 312.

26. p. 1271.

27. pp. 1271-1272.

28. p. 1272.

29. *Ibid.*

30. p. 1273.

31. pp. 1274-1281.

32. p. 1277.

33. pp. 1274- 1275.

34. p. 1281.

35. Schooler’s ethnic continuum is given some independent corroboration by the following results of a survey taken among the citizens of several nations and reported in Donald J. Devine, “The Political Culture of the United States,” *The New York Times Magazine*, 9 May 1982, p. 50:

“The individual owes his first duty to the state and only secondarily to his personal welfare.”

25% yes; 68% no: United States

38% yes; 55% no: United Kingdom

41% yes; 45% no: West Germany

48% yes; 32% no: Italy

92% yes; 5% no: Mexico

A high scorer on Schooler's scale of "authoritarian conservatism" -- not to be confused with that conservatism which is more accurately called "classical liberalism" -- would agree that one's duty to the state comes before concern for one's personal welfare.

36. 80 (July 1974), 170-204.

37. p. 170.

38. Greeley, p. 175.

39. *Ibid.*, pp. 172-173.

40. p. 175

41. p. 181.

42. p. 182.

43. p. 183.

44. p. 182.

45. p. 189.

46. p. 191. Arnold Toynbee sees in the Irish Protestants of Appalachia an example of a people which has failed to respond adequately to the challenge of a new environment:

Obviously this American challenge has been more formidable than the Irish challenge in both its aspects, physical and human. Has the increased challenge evoked an increased response? If we compare the Ulsterman and the Appalachian of today, two centuries after they parted company, we shall find that the answer is once again in the negative. The modern Appalachian has not only not improved on the Ulsterman; he has failed to hold his ground and has gone downhill in a most disconcerting fashion. In fact, the Appalachian "mountain people" to-day are no better than barbarians.... They are the American counterparts of the latter-day White barbarians of the Old World -- Rifis, Albanians, Kurds, Pathans and Hairy Ainus; but, whereas these latter are belated survivals of an ancient barbarism, the Appalachians present the melancholy spectacle of a people who have acquired civilization and then lost it.

*A Study of History*, Abridgement of Volumes I-VT by D. C. Somervell, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), I, 149.

47. p. 204.

48. (New York: Wiley, 1974), p. 100.

49. *Ibid.*, pp. 102-103.

50. Stephan Thernstrom, ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 808.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 807. Carl Wittke's tribute to Irish American political expertise, in his *We Who Built America: The Saga of the Immigrant* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1939), suggests that the Irish may have seized on the Anglo-Saxon political tradition and transformed it into what has become typically American politics:

The Irish added turbulence and excitement to political campaigns. They also contributed a new picturesqueness and dramatic quality to the methods of political campaigning and canvassing the vote of large masses of people. By building up strong political machines in the cities, they became, along with the Solid South, the one stable element that kept the Democratic party -- then a minority group -- alive after the Civil War and gave it its occasional chance for victory. . . . No other immigrant group has ever



taken so quickly and completely to the American political system,...

By nature, the Irishman seems to have possessed many of the qualities that make for a successful politician (pp. 159-160).

52. Kantowicz, pp.810-811.

53. (Boston: Twayne, 1976), pp. 52, 49. Marcus L. Hansen, "The Revolutions of 1848 and German Emigration," *Journal of Economic and Business History*, 11(1930), 630-658, also deemphasizes political ideals as a cause of German immigration to the United States. For a detailed account of failed attempts to establish "New Germanies on American Soil," see John A. Hawgood, *The Tragedy of German-America* (New York: G. P. Putnam's, 1940).

54. Kantowicz, pp. 809-810.

55. Rippley, p. 55.

56. p. 52.

57. Kantowicz, p. 810.

58. Rippley, p. 128.

59. "The Great Melting Pot," *U.S. News & World Report*, 7 July 1986, pp. 30-31. Other states having high percentages of Americans of German descent and their respective percentages include the following: North Dakota, 50%; Minnesota, 48%; Kansas, 43%.

60. Rippley, pp. 119-128, provides a brief history of the rise and fall of schooling in the German language in the U.S. While use of the German language in instruction and worship seems to have followed a steadily downward gradient, the language of another non-Anglo-Saxon ethnic group, the Norwegian Americans, actually underwent a brief period of revitalization during the years 1870-1900. For a detailed account, see Frank C. Nelson, "Norwegian-American Attitudes Toward Assimilation During Four Periods of their History in America, 1825-1930," *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, 9, Spring 1981, pp. 59-68, an excerpt from which follows:

"Resignation to assimilation" was followed by a period of "renewed ethnicity," and lasted from 1870 to 1900. . . . With large numbers of Norwegians coming to America there emerged a significant shift in attitude from the "resignation to assimilation." There developed a new attitude that Norwegians ought "not to be too quick to mimic everything American before we have tested whether it is better than our own." The churches of the Norwegian immigrants played a significant role in promoting this new spirit. As the Lutheran church and other church bodies became stronger as a result of the influx of new members, the congregations began to strongly oppose assimilation and accommodation to American society. . . . A strategy of the Norwegian immigrant clergy was to keep the immigrants from learning English and prevent the erosion of their membership by the aggressive American churches. The period between 1870 and 1900 has been called "the Norwegian period." At this time the Norwegian language had been established as the language of the family, church, and neighborhood.... Signs of Norwegian culture were increasingly evident in Norwegian settlements. The Norwegian writer Kristofer Janson lectured to the Norwegian immigrant settlements in 1879-80. When he visited Scandinavia, Wisconsin, he was impressed by Scandinavia's close resemblance to a small community in Norway: "On the streets, in stores, one heard only Norwegian... " The Lutheran church of 1900 was more ethnic than it had been a half century earlier. It had become so as a result of the large numbers of new immigrants and the

emergence of an ethnicity long repressed. This new spirit of ethnic awareness was expressed in an editorial in a Norwegian language newspaper: “. . . until recently it was a common belief that the Norwegian language would inside a few years be ‘dead as a doornail.’ We could already hear the funeral bells peal. . . but now, instead of a funeral, we are witnessing the march of triumph.”... the Norwegian language had become so popular that it was not only being studied by persons of Norwegian descent but even by Yankees, Irishmen, and Jews.” No statistics reveal how many Yankees, Irishmen, and Jews were learning Norwegian for sheer joy alone (pp. 62-63).

61. Rippley, p. 181.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 195. Dieckhoff estimated that of 700,000 Germans in Chicago, 40,000 belonged to German clubs, and 450 of these to the Bund. Sander A. Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States, 1924-1941* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1974), states that a large Bund meeting in New York City in 1939 drew a crowd of whom 25 percent were Germans, 25 percent Irish, 20 percent Italian, and the rest members of the Christian Mobilizers having unknown national origins. He notes further that regular “meetings were attended by anti-British workingclass Irish, Russian emigres, Italian ex-servicemen, Coughlinites, and lower-middle-class and working-class native Americans” (p. 320).

63. (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1956), pp. 137-167. William Lemke, Presidential candidate of the Union party in the 1936 election, would seem to be an exception to the rule that there have been no German-American demagogues, but his party -- which did not survive the 1936 election -- was the creation of Father Coughlin’s largely Irish and urban National Union for Social Justice and it received most support from the largely Scandinavian activists of the Non-Partisan League as well as native American followers of Dr. Francis Townsend. (See Lubell, pp. 151-154.) The most effective spokesmen for German-American isolationist sentiments prior to 1941 were the non-Germans Charles A. Lindbergh, Jr., and Phil LaFollette. LaFollette’s father Robert had been a spokesman for German-American isolationist sentiments a generation earlier.

64. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972).

65. (New York: Macmillan, 1972).

66. (New York: Free Press, 1983), p. 185. According to U.S. Census Bureau reports, in 1980 there were 49.2 million Americans claiming to be of German descent, only slightly less than the 49.6 million of English descent. Irish Americans were not much less numerous with a total of 40.2 million (“The Great Melting Pot,” p. 30). Archdeacon cites (p. 239) a National Opinion Research Corporation survey which revealed that, in 1980, 20.1 percent of Americans were of German descent, while Americans having ancestry from England, Scotland, and Wales together comprised only 17.7 percent of the total U.S. population. According to this NORC survey, the Irish comprised 11.5 percent of the total.

67. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1957). Wittfogel maintains that Soviet totalitarianism is a new manifestation of ancient Oriental despotism.

68. See George Fields, “Racism is Accepted Practice in Japan,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 10 Nov. 1986, p. 23.