

Cautionary Lessons from the Americanization Movement of the Early 20th Century

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Of all the movements of the Progressive Era of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Americanization was perhaps the most ambitious. Not content with structural political reform or economic regulation, Americanization sought the transformation of the individual – culturally, emotionally, spiritually – from alien to American. I make a distinction here between “Americanization” and assimilation. Americanization was a social movement to improve the status of immigrants in American society between 1900 and 1920s. I define assimilation as being processes by which a society becomes more homogeneous and individuals in a society come to see themselves as sharing a common identity. I use the term “assimilation” when discussing early 20th century programs, because that is the term policy makers used, and I use “integration” in relation to modern “Americanization” programs.

The Americanization movement of the early 20th century connected citizenship and national identity to a social reform program that promoted adult education and improved labor and housing conditions as a way of creating a more

homogeneous society that was also more tolerant of ethnic and cultural diversity. In the early 2000s, several American states, many of which had had Americanization programs in the early 20th century, began developing new social welfare policies to integrate immigrants. Yet policy makers in these states are working in a vacuum of historical knowledge of both policy and context. Their failure to know history weakens their policy making.

Before 1917, only New York and California had social welfare programs specifically designed to encourage immigrant assimilation. In the summer of 1917, Massachusetts started its program, and between 1917 and 1920, 35 states initiated some kind of Americanization policy. These Americanization programs fell into two general categories, what I call “environmental” and “educational.”

Environmental Americanization policies sought to reform the social environment in which immigrants lived and worked, with the hope that the improved environment would then change the immigrant and encourage him or her to assimilate into mainstream American

society. The idea behind environmental Americanization programs was that immigrants could not be expected to embrace an American lifestyle, or would even know what true American values and behaviors were, until those values and behaviors had been demonstrated to them by native-born Americans. Environmental Americanization programs included monitoring piers and train stations to prevent crime and fraud; inspecting labor camps for health, safety, and sanitation; inspecting and regulating housing conditions, and mediating and resolving disputes between immigrants and their American employers, landlords, and neighbors. These programs focused on changing the behavior of the native-born more than that of the foreign-born, and were often part of a larger progressive effort to develop a modern welfare state.

Educational Americanization programs alternately sought to change some aspect of the immigrant's culture through classes that taught English, American history, civics, and home economics. Many educational Americanization programs targeted women, although there were also factory classes for both men and women that combined safety training with English literacy. There was a fair amount of variation across the states, but in general, Americanization activists equated Americanization with immigrant social welfare, usually couched in terms of education, job services, legal aid, and the regulation of working and housing conditions. Pre-war Americanization programs tended to focus more on regulating working and living conditions, while wartime- and- immediate post-war programs emphasized education, particularly English language instruction.

The goals of states' Americanization policies were greater social stability, cultural homogeneity, educational opportunity, and economic efficiency, as well as a stronger social welfare state that could successfully mitigate the destructive consequences of laissez-faire industrial capitalism. State-based Americanization activists focused on the passage and enforcement of stronger protective legislation in order to create a more just and humane social environment into which immigrants would want to assimilate. State-based immigrant welfare policies were based upon the assumption that the foreign-born faced unique challenges in adjusting to life in the U.S. and so deserved special protection and assistance that only government could provide. State Americanization activists insisted that immigrants' poor living and working conditions were the result of prejudice and discrimination by the native-born, not the cultural or racial deficiencies of the immigrants themselves. These officials and activists argued that, actually, it was the native-born who needed to be "Americanized" to be more tolerant of the foreign-born. And if Americans were unwilling to reform themselves, then Americanization agencies would compel them to treat immigrants more justly.

1919 was the high point of the Americanization movement, after which the movement began to collapse as a result of the loss of federal support and attacks by conservatives, who argued that the solution to America's immigration issues was restriction, not government-subsidized assimilation. Some state Americanization programs, including in New York, California and Massachusetts, however, continued into the 1930s and even 1940s.

New Americans Initiatives

Between 2005 and 2008, after more than 30 years of increased immigration, several American states began again to promote social welfare policies for immigrants. These Americanization programs were often called “New Americans” Initiatives. The states that were most active were Illinois, California, Washington, and Massachusetts. The governors of these states created advisory and policy councils that were charged with working with immigrant advocacy groups, foundations, research think tanks, and other not-for-profits to provide a variety of services to immigrants, particularly non-English speakers. There was also a strong focus on the creation of standards and “best practices” against which government agencies would be measured in their delivery of services to immigrants. The main goals of these New Americans Initiatives were to improve immigrants’ access to state and local government services; improve the delivery of government services to immigrants; provide English language classes, and help immigrants with citizenship applications.

Examples of “New Americans” Initiative programs range from offering educational and legal assistance in applying for naturalization; allowing undocumented immigrants to receive driver’s licenses and other forms of state identification; allowing undocumented immigrant students to attend state-funded universities at state resident tuition rates, and in some cases, allowing undocumented immigrant students to receive academic scholarships. Other “New Americans” Initiative programs offer free or discounted health care services in immigrant neighborhoods.

“New Americans” Initiatives are cur-

rently to be implemented in Illinois, California, Washington, and Massachusetts, and other states with pro-immigrant leadership have passed laws designed to encourage the integration of immigrants, especially undocumented ones.

Americanization Programs vs. “New Americans” Initiatives

Similarities

Both were initiated by states in response to perceived inadequate federal attention to the status of immigrants already in the country. Both were concerned with assimilation or, as it is now called, integration of immigrants in various ways: socially, economically, and politically (i.e., through naturalization and citizenship education). Both claimed that their goal was “two-way” or mutual assimilation but both focused primarily or exclusively on immigrants. Due to funding limitations, both focused on providing social welfare to working class or poor people, with the hope and assumption that they would reach many immigrants who fall into those categories. Both relied extensively on assistance from private organizations. Both were heavily dependent on political leadership and support, particularly from governors. When the political leadership of a state changed, both policies were vulnerable to budget cutbacks and either political pressure or neglect.

Differences

The goals of “New Americans” Initiatives are more limited, focusing primarily on naturalization. The primary definition of assimilation (or “integration”) is the acquisition of political citizenship, not social or residential integration, em-

ployment in the mainstream economy, English fluency, or inter-marriage with U.S. citizens. The distinction between legal and illegal immigration, and the many consequences of these different legal statuses, did not exist in the early 20th century. So, “New Americans” programs must tailor their services according to the legal statuses of their targeted audiences, because undocumented immigrants are not eligible for citizenship.

The larger goal and methodology of the “New Americans” Initiatives – the improvement of the delivery of government services through the establishment of standards and best practices – is not clearly related to immigrant integration, and could be applied to any other group in society – women, children, other ethnic or racial minorities, the disabled, etc. “New American” programs claim that they promote “two-way” integration. Yet since few if any “New Americans” programs impact the native-born, it is unclear how this is “two-way.” “New Americans” Initiatives include immigrant organizations much more than past Americanization agencies did. Americanization in the 1910s and 1920s was much more “top down” directed and run by native-born elites and university-educated first-generation Americans.

The “New Americans” projects were often initiated by pro-immigrant advocacy organizations and the programs frequently included on-going public-private partnerships. Once a project was started, the initiating organization did not disappear, but continued to work with the state in implementing the policy. This was less common with Americanization programs, although not unheard of. “New Americans” programs often have an evaluation

component that focuses on improving the delivery of government services to non-English speakers; the social science evaluation of program effectiveness did not exist in the Americanization movement.

“New Americans” Initiatives are much less developed ideologically than Americanization programs were. There is little deep consideration of the meanings of American citizenship or theories or methods of assimilation. As noted before, the target audience of “New Americans” Initiatives could often be easily shifted to another perceived disadvantaged group in American society. “New Americans” Initiatives and other current immigrant social welfare policies are being implemented in ignorance of the earlier Americanization movement, or of how scholars measure the assimilation of earlier immigrant groups or the persistence of pluralism in American society.

What policy makers can learn about immigration, and policy making, from studying history?

The most important use of historical knowledge in policy making is not re-inventing old policies or programs to fit new situations, but using history as a guide to recognizing crucial differences in context. The context of American immigration today is different from that in the 19th and early 20th centuries, both in terms of policy and in the nature of society and the economy. What is not different are people’s motives for migration: economic opportunity and mobility, political stability, personal freedom, family unification, escaping war, violence, and other turmoil. Immigrants’ challenges in adjusting to life in a new country are also surprisingly similar, although clearly not

identical, across time periods.

“New” policies are rarely new. In fact, they often contain remnants of older policies. When designing new policies or writing new legislation, policy makers and policy scholars should consider whether policy measures designed for an older time and/or with different motives are worth keeping. They should ask: has a policy or elements of a policy outlived its usefulness? How is today’s society, economy, and immigration policy different from those of the past?

One cannot answer this question without first knowing what the origins of the policy are, and most of the time, policy makers are not even aware that a policy has a history, much less know what that history is. Studying the history can teach the policy maker the true distinctions between historical contexts, and expose false differences as well. So, I would, for instance, argue that there are not significant differences between immigration from Europe in the 19th century and immigration from Asia in the 20th and 21st centuries in terms of ethnicity/race or class. But what is different is the legal regime that controls that migration and the changes in the American economy that provide opportunities for migrants.

And finally, the study of immigration history and policy liberates the scholar and policy maker of contemporary immigration by revealing past options, solutions, and failures that are not considered today primarily because they challenge conventional wisdom. Simply knowing that things have been different in the past can enable one to see contemporary policy in new ways. As with the Americanization movement in the early 1920s, the “New Americans Initiatives” and other

immigrant social welfare programs at the state level are being implemented without much coordination or guidance from the federal government, and what knowledge-sharing that occurs among state bureaucrats, activists, and scholars is the result of their own initiatives and outreach to one another. Knowledge of the successes, failures, and context of the earlier Americanization movement would improve the policies of the New Americans Initiatives and other immigrant integration programs of the early 21st century.

Bibliography

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