

# The Americanization Movement during the Progressive Era

by Djineva Reneau Tuzzolino, College of the Redwoods

Mentors: Peter Blakemore and George Potamianos

The Americanization movement was a movement that emerged during the early turn of the century and sought to 'Americanize' the immigrant population in cities. Americanization was the effort to acclimate and educate immigrants to prepare them for all aspects of American life, including learning English, finding a home, raising children, and getting a job. My question at issue is, how did Americanization seek to change the lives of immigrants? Media representation of both Americanization and immigrants and particular methods used to Americanize immigrants will be main focus of the paper.

With headlines like "Make Aliens Americans Appeal of Leading Thinkers of Nation in Convention", "Mrs. Vincent Astor Writes on Our Duty to Immigrants and How to Make Them Real Americans." and "Americanization—Why it is Needed and Who is Doing the Work", an image of duty, patriotism, and selflessness is invoked. Americanization is presented as a gift to immigrants, given to them by the patriotic and kind American volunteer or organization. The article, "Make Aliens Americans Appeal of Leading Thinkers of Nation in Convention", defines the Americanization movement as "... [not] a fad of the idle rich. It is a concerted action to bring the rich and the poor, the native born and the foreign born to the realization of the meaning of the word America."

Americanization was presented as kind, helpful, and necessary to white Americans. To Americans, Americanization was a bridge between wealthy white Americans, and poor immigrants. That image is quickly ruined when one sees how the immigrant is represented in this relationship between them and the American who seeks to assimilate them. Once one reads the "Duty to Immigrants" article, Americanization seems much more prejudiced and unkind. Immigrant women are presented as simple, clumsy, uneducated, and completely unprepared for American life through quotes like "...An immigrant woman doesn't even know what an American dustpan is. In Europe she was used to doing her cleaning by throwing a pail of water over the stone court, and so she does the same thing in her 'flat' here and wonders why her neighbor below objects and why the agent comes to threaten her with eviction of she does it again;" "[Take] the woman to market, explain the puzzling American money, and the need for saving some of it!" and "They will show the women...why window screens are important, why the children should not sleep in close rooms covered in pillows, and a hundred other things of direct importance to the immigrant family." (Astor, 1915)

Immigrant women are represented as unfit mothers, as they seem to have the intelligence of a child themselves. The article seeks to invoke charitableness, but also superiority and pity. Presenting immigrants as uneducated and primitive did two things, it continued to justify peoples prejudice against immigrants and their perception of them as stupid and unworthy, but it also reinforced nationalism and the belief that American life was much more advanced than life anywhere else. The mix of nationalism and xenophobia made the Americanization movement

very compelling to both lower class and higher class Americans. Americanization is a movement for Americans to prove their selflessness while also enforcing the status quo and reinforcing the belief that immigrants were simple and uneducated and deserved the poor conditions and treatment that they were given. The “Duty to Immigrants” article is infantilizing and condescending towards immigrant women, while praising American society and citizens, a common thread in pro-Americanization rhetoric.

In fact, the targeting of immigrant women was another common thread in Americanization propaganda. In the article “Americanization Begins At Home—With Mother,” by Lily Lykes Rowe, the population of the immigrant women is vaguely referred to as “The woman with a shawl over her head”, and are accused of “dragging” the assimilation out, saying that, “[the] duties of caring for a household were increased by visiting friends and relatives from the old country. She was too busy to attend night classes or baby welfare clinics and so was shut off from all channels through which she might come into contact with English-speaking people.” Rowe claims that the woman’s sense of duty to their “friends and relatives from the old world” is an important piece of rhetoric, claiming that the family and the friends that come from the woman’s native culture are the exact things that hold her back. It is an attack on her culture, it is a case for why the eradication of immigrant culture is so important, so that these poor immigrant women can be free from their “old world” duties and values and replace those values with patriotic ones.

Painting the culture of immigrant as oppressive to the immigrants themselves is an excellent tool to make the case for why assimilation is necessary, creating this narrative where we as the Americans must rescue the immigrants from their own heritage and show them the light of free American life. The article continues, claiming that immigrant women being more difficult to Americanize than immigrant men was “largely due to the attitude of the men in her family, who held the old country idea that their women’s places were in the home” (Rowe, 3), and therefore were not allowed or able to leave her home to access education. Considering that this article was written in 1919, before women were even allowed to vote, highlighting the alleged oppressions faced by immigrant women from immigrant men because of “old world values” is hypocritical at best.

Interestingly enough, the article was written by a woman, demonstrating the incredibly old pattern of the white woman insulting the cultures and lives of foreign women to make themselves feel better about their own society, and inserting themselves into the white savior narrative of ‘liberating’ women of color from their own culture. This pattern continues today, with white feminists insisting on ‘saving’ women of color from their ‘primitive’ society, while simultaneously silencing the voices of those women and separating them from their culture which actually gives them strength and solidarity. The article demonstrates that white women played just as much of a role in white supremacy as white men did, and that the pattern of the oppression of women of color at the hands of white women is an incredibly old one.

Not only does condemning the supposed misogyny of the vague ‘old country’ perpetuate the white savior myth and separate immigrant women from their native cultures, it also gave white women and men even more excuses to demonize the immigrant man, even if white men were guilty of the same crimes. This is readily apparent in a section of the article, literally titled “The Opposition of Men”, that claims “[one] of the greatest obstacles in our efforts to reach the foreign

born women has been the foreign born man's antagonism to her taking part in the community life."

The unique prejudice against both genders of immigrants is complex, with Americans blaming immigrant men for being controlling and abusive, while condemning immigrant women for being too stupid and repressed to even know that the destruction of her culture is in her own interest. The culture of the immigrant was attacked from all angles; it was represented as primitive, misogynistic, and threat to white supremacy. The white conservative, the white liberal, and the white woman could all be united in their hatred and quest for assimilation, although they may have very different reasons for doing it.

Not only was Americanization xenophobic and racist, it was also extremely anti-Semitic. In one article, "The Jews Complaint against 'Americanism,'" the amount of anti-Semitism is almost staggering, with Judaism being referred to as "Jewry", and declaring, "Judaism impossible in the United States." The article continued, saying "[the] trend of 'Americanism' is so different than the trend of 'Judaism' that the two are in conflict." The article makes it perfectly clear that the intention of Americanization is not to Americanize Jews, but to rid America of Jews. Jewish communities are described as "foreign ghettos", and an emphasis on the threat of a Jewish "super-nation" is constantly stressed. According to the article, if the Jewish people are "[a] people within a people, a nation within a nation," then "[the] solution must come through one of two things: a separation of the 'nation' from the rest of the nation, or an exhalation of the 'nation' above the rest.... The leaders expect both of these conditions to come, both a separate nation and a super-nation." This myth of imminent Jewish dominance is still used today in anti-Semitic rhetoric, to the same degree that it is used in the article. The sheer amount of hatred for the Jewish people in the article is shocking; the amount of dehumanization is absolutely on par with that of the immigrant. The article claims that Jews believe that, "...the presence of Gentiles contaminated them," and that "[it] is not the Gentile who says that Jewish ideals, as ideals are incompatible with life in our country, it is the Jew who says so." The presentation of Jews as extremely powerful and disdainful of Gentile Americans is a clear ploy to incite violence and hatred towards Jews, even the American-born Jews. While the immigrant is represented as too dumb to know better, the Jew is represented as crafty and malicious. Americanization highly emphasized the already-existing prejudices and fears of the white gentiles of America, creating images of the immigrant population overtaking the white American population, of crafty Jews creating a "super-nation", to further cement those fears, while also legitimizing their own cause.

While those involved with Americanization claimed to desire to educate immigrants and improve their lives, what this consisted of was mostly making them better, more productive workers. This becomes almost startlingly obvious when you look at how, and what kinds of English the immigrants were taught. One of the clearest examples comes from United States Steel Corporation, *Lessons for Teaching Foreigners English* by the Roberts Method. The Roberts Method was well-intentioned, created by Paul Roberts with the intention to teach immigrants simple, situation-specific phrases to make English easy to learn and easy to speak. Roberts marketed the method wherever he could, but businesses made the most use of it, giving immigrants exclusively work related phrases to learn. While Roberts created the method with the hopes that immigrants would be able to learn phrases for every aspect of life, workers were

only taught work-related phrases, and with access to education incredibly limited, so was the immigrants access to the English language, as you can see below.

## LESSON I

<b>Want</b> .....	I want work.
<b>Go to</b> .....	I go to <b>the</b> Employment Office.
<b>Ask for</b> .....	I ask <b>for</b> work.
<b>Get</b> .....	I get a job.
<b>Give</b> .....	I give my name.
<b>Live</b> .....	I tell where I live now.
<b>Lived</b> .....	I tell where I lived in my Country.
<b>Tell</b> .....	I tell my wife's name.
<b>Little book</b> .....	I am given a little book.
<b>Must read</b> .....	I must read <b>the</b> book.
<b>Keep from</b> .....	<b>The</b> book tells how to keep from getting hurt.

Figure 1: Excerpt from the *Lessons for Teaching Foreigners English* by the Roberts Method

The phrases are purposefully limited, giving them only enough education to make them convenient workers, not educated or articulate ones. The lessons are not lessons in how to construct a sentence or a phrase, it is education based on the memorization of short phrases. “I want work.” “I ask for work.” “They must be taken to the shop.” These are not phrases that you teach someone who you are interested in having a conversation with. These are phrases that the worker learns so that the white American boss can communicate orders more easily. It seems that one of the biggest motivations for Americanization is convenience, not actual support for immigrants. It is more convenient when all of our workers speak the same language. It is convenient when immigrants comply with American values. It is convenient when the upper and middle class were allowed to continue to enforce their will and values upon immigrants, and maintain white supremacy through selective education and oppression.

Not only was Americanization motivated by nationalism, but by pure racism. It was a massive push for assimilation directed at immigrants out of fear that Americans would be the ones assimilated into the culture of immigrants. With increased immigration, white Americans felt under attack, fearing the disappearance of white Americans, or as Paul McBride calls it, “race suicide.” McBride found in his research a common thread of fear that White Americans and Anglo-Saxon supremacy would be erased and challenged through the increased immigrant population, and concluded that was one of the key motivators for the mass application of Americanization in America through large organizations like the YMCA, which is a position that aligns with mine exactly.

The YMCA can easily be called one of the biggest organizations devoted to Americanization, establishing its Americanization program in 1907 and by 1919, was one of the most powerful forces driving the Americanization movement. In The “Y.M.C.A in Americanization”, an address by Peter Roberts, a YMCA representative at an Americanization Conference in 1919, the six “main lines of activity” are clearly defined. Those six lines of activity are as follows:

- The teaching of English;
- The “naturalization” of immigrants through awarding them citizenship;
- Educating immigrants on American history and culture in the form of lectures;
- Encouraging immigrants to become entertainers or to somehow provide amusement and recreation for white Americans;
- Teaching immigrant children American games and giving them “structure” in their lives; and,
- The advisory of immigrant men by white Americans.

With over 200 Americanization centers active in cities with large immigrant populations, 1,000 volunteers operating and maintaining those centers, and an estimated 50,000 immigrant men receiving their services, the YMCA had a clear goal: to Americanize as many immigrants as possible. Roberts himself says that, “[the] program of the Y.M.C.A is projected wherever possible. In industrial plants, in clubs, in societies among foreign-born men” (351).

The YMCA was so successful and influential in their quest popularize Americanization that one member from the YMCA, George W. Mehaffey, who was at the time the general secretary of the Boston YMCA, formed his own Americanization league, the North American Civil League for Immigrants.

The NACL defined their mission in their *1910-1911 Annual Report* as, “[organized] to defend Immigrants and Resident Aliens against the designs of the unscrupulous, and to interest them in the requirements of American citizenship, to the end that American Institutions may be strengthened.” ‘American institutions’ is an incredibly broad, vague term that is incredibly easy to interpret as all facets of White supremacy, or at least White American supremacy. The NACL states in their annual report that, “[the] status of the immigrant in the United States is unsatisfactory” and refers to the existence of immigrants in America as, “the immigration problem.” In the passages of their annual report they refer to the language of the immigrants as “a babel of tongues,” and that the immigrants themselves “...represented the poor and unskilled of the world. And in no small measure they represented the untaught and the illiterate as well.”

The NACLs open prejudice against immigrants seems to be directed mostly at Eastern and Southern Europeans, as the *Annual Report* describes them as, “ignorant to our form of government; their ways of thinking and their habits of life are totally alien to ours.” The emphasis on the immigrants diluting the white population and taking over cities is extremely common in the *Annual Report*, with quotes like: “a generation ago a million immigrants a year was unthinkable; to-day it is a fact. In the past ten years more immigrants have come in than in the preceding twenty-five.” The *Annual Report* continued, claiming that “social problems that are the direct result in the change of character and amount of immigration during the past thirty years...poverty has increased in America, the evils of child labor have been fostered, the dark and insanitary tenement house and slum have grown, home life and home influences have been in great measure destroyed among the lower working class.” Immigrants are so poorly spoken of in the report, that they are blamed for the idea that “ignorance in America and disregard for America have spread, while life has an assumed a sordid, sullen, mere bread and butter aspect.”

While the NACL defined a clear 'immigration problem', they also defined a solution. The *Annual Report* clearly outlines their mission, explaining the ways in which they want to influence the immigrant, and the reasons for doing so as well.

To change the unskilled, inefficient immigrant into the skilled worker and efficient citizen, to strike at the causes of poverty, to improve the environment and the life of the worker, to eradicate ignorance, and finally to breathe the spirit of America, the knowledge of America and the love of America and of one's fellow-men into the millions gathered and gathering here from the ends of the earth, -- this is the immigration problem. To protect, to aid, to educate, and to inspire is the summing up of the social work with which our present stream of immigration confronts us.

The *Annual Report* continues, stating that, "[not] only compassion, but self-interest as well, demands that we consider the well-being of the immigrant. A million immigrants a year,— ignorant of our language, our laws, and our customs—, might well, if neglected and exploited, become a menace to the spirit of American democracy." Immigrants are represented as filthy, as unintelligent, as undeserving of life in America, while also being accused of degrading the quality of American life, and the quality of America itself. They are either shown as stupid or threatening, either deserving of pity or disdain, a pattern that shows up time and time again in media directed toward White Americans on the subject of immigration.

While the YMCA can be called the most influential organization in support of Americanization, the most influential man in support of the cause was Theodore Roosevelt. He was unflinching in his beliefs that Americanization was not an option for immigrants, but a requirement. During a luncheon hosted by Mrs. Vincent Astor in 1916, Roosevelt was quoted as saying, "[let] us say to the immigrant not that we hope he will learn English, but that he has got to learn it. Let the immigrant who does not learn it go back" (Roosevelt, 1916). He continued,

If I could I would have the kind of restriction which would not allow any immigrant to come here unless I was content that his grandchildren would be fellow citizens of my grandchildren. They will not be so if he lives in a boarding house at \$2.50 a month with ten other boarders and contracts tuberculosis and contributes to the next generation a body of citizen's inferior not only morally and spiritually but also physically. (Roosevelt, 1916)

Roosevelt's message is clear, he who has the qualities of an immigrant and lives the life of an immigrant cannot be worthwhile in an American society, and is not welcome in his vision of America. In 1894 he wrote a section in the *Forum*, "[we] must Americanize them in every way, in speech, in political ideas and principles, and in their way of looking at the relations between Church and State. We welcome the German or the Irishman who becomes an American. We have no use for the German or Irishman who remains such." He continued, "[the] mighty tide of immigration to our shores has brought in its train much of good and much of evil; and whether the good or the evil shall predominate depends mainly on whether these newcomers do or do not throw themselves heartily into our national life, cease to be Europeans, and become Americans like the rest of us." Theodore Roosevelt's vision of America has room for only a certain kind of immigrant: the English-speaking, assimilated immigrant, a man indistinguishable from a 'true American' that is, in reality, no immigrant at all. This 'acceptance' of immigrants based on the fulfillment near-impossible standards was extremely common in Americanization.

When you create conditional acceptance, you also create justified hatred for those who do not meet those standards. This was used to justify the ongoing oppression of immigrants, and is a tactic still used against marginalized people today.

One of the most frustrating things about the Americanization movement is the way that it took the structure and methods of the settlement movement, a movement that focused on bettering the lives of immigrants through access to services of all kinds, and turned it into an effective method of the eradication of the culture of immigrants. The Americanization movement did not aim to make the lives of immigrants any better; it sought to make the lives of Americans better by erasing the presence of languages other than English and cultures other than the culture of the white American.

One of the best examples of the settlement movement and its effect on the lives of immigrants was in Jane Addams's Hull House. Jane Addams was an activist and a reformer, seeking to end child labor and better the lives of the poor. She created Hull House in 1889, starting as a one-building settlement house for all Chicago residents in need, but it served largely immigrants and the poor. The stated goal of Hull House was to provide, "[a] center for higher civic and social life, to institute and maintain educational and philanthropic enterprises, and to investigate and improve the conditions in the industrial districts of Chicago." (*Hull House Year Book*, 1907.)

They were extremely successful in their mission. By 1907 classes of almost every kind were available at Hull House, such as English, math, special English classes for non-English speaking immigrants, and even arts and crafts classes such as pottery making and weaving. They had public reading rooms that functioned as libraries, schools of citizenship for immigrants that assisted them in getting their citizenship papers, and they even had clubs for drama, athletics, and clubs like 'Circolo Italiano', 'Cuahtemoc Club', and 'Greek Olympian Athletic Club' That were created by and for Italian, Latino, and Greek immigrants to give them a lasting connection with their home country and give them a way to preserve culture, something that set it apart greatly from the Americanization movement.

They hosted public discussions on social issues as well, as the staff at Hull House found immense value in allowing the poorer classes to speak their minds and learn, as stated in the *Hull House Year Book*, "[as] long as social growth proceeds by successive changes and adaptations, such free discussion is most valuable." This was very different that the usual kind of education offered to immigrants, and contrasts greatly with the education given to immigrants thorough the Roberts Method that I mentioned earlier. Along with education, Hull House provided weekly children's health clinics as well, providing healthcare to poor children who never would have had access to it otherwise. These services were widely used by the citizens of Chicago, with large numbers, according to the *Year Book*, "Six thousand people come to Hull House each week during the winter months." Jane Addams and the volunteers at Hull House were incredibly successful in their goals to improve the lives of the people around them, as Hull House went from one house in 1889 to a twelve-building settlement before it was shut down in 2012. (*Chicago Tribune*, January 24, 2012)

What becomes confusing with Hull House, however, is the fact that it was created before the Americanization movement, even though Jane Addams herself quickly attached herself and endorsed the Americanization movement to the point where she was considered to be at the forefront of it. The blurring between the lines of the two movements to the point where they were indistinguishable creates a complicated image of Americanization. On one hand, Hull House was operational both before and after the Americanization movement, and Jane Addams herself considered herself first part of the settlement movement, but later part of the Americanization movement. Did the Americanization movement absorb smaller movements like the settlement movement into itself? Or was Hull House simply one lone good side of Americanization? It seems to me that Hull House is a reminder of what could have been if assimilation and white supremacy had not infected the settlement movement to the point where it was the defining aspect of Americanization, turning it into not an effort to support immigrants, but an effort to make them disappear.

Although Americanization was widely accepted and praised, it certainly encountered opposition. Chairman of the Committee of Industrial Relations, Frank P. Walsh, sent a letter to Frank Trumbull, chairman of the Americanization Committee published in the *Evening Public Ledger*. The letter stated that, “[standards] of living and of citizenship can only be brought about through the betterment of wages and working conditions.” In the letter, Walsh also states, “I am forced to believe that the last thing your committee desires is the Americanization of the immigrant, and that instead you are trying to set up a paternalism that will bring the workers of this country even more absolutely under the control of the employer than they are now.” He goes on to say that committee members are “relentlessly resisting any movement that threatens to free their employees from industrial tyranny.” Walsh goes so far as to criticize the industrial state of American as a whole, saying, “Americanization means a state of satisfaction with bad industrial conditions, and bad industrial conditions are distinctively American.” His rebuttal against Americanization was passionate, but with people like Theodore Roosevelt on board with the movement and the use of racist propaganda, it was difficult to sway the opinions of anyone.

Americanization was a movement that sought to assimilate the growing immigrant population through specialized education, oppression, and the de-legitimization of the cultures, customs and behaviors of immigrants and all non-white Americans. It was a movement characterized by nationalism, xenophobia, and white supremacy that went as far as it could to force its way into the lives of those targeted to repress and erase their cultures.

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