

## THE EVOLUTION OF THE MELTING POT CONCEPT

**ARIBI Brahim**

Amar Thelidji University, Laghouat  
**ALGERIA**

### ABSTRACT

In the very core of the optimistic assimilationists' battle for Americanizing the non-white population of the United States, the idea of the Melting Pot emerged as a substitute for all what assimilation involves. With the emergence of the Melting Pot, the glittering terms such as Americanization and Anglo-Conformity went out of fashion. As such, talks raised on amalgamating the people of different races and cultures to form a more homogenous society rather than assimilating them into the dominant Anglo-Protestant culture. The idea of the Melting Pot, however, has been more likely to fit for the case of immigrants coming from different nations and cultural backgrounds than the Mexican American population which has a large portion of U.S. born citizens.

**Keywords:** Assimilation; Anglo-Protestant; Americanization; non-white population.

### INTRODUCTION

For a brief period of time, the position of Mexican Americans has been a matter of concern to scholars and historians. The latter wondered whether to consider Mexicans as a race or an ethnicity. Referring to the morphological features of human beings such as skin colour, the word "race" has been a dismal failure to denote the group. Mexican Americans include mestizos, Mulattos, Spaniards, yet they still constitute a unified community that speaks the same language and shares the same values. The mingling of European Spaniards, Native American Indians, Black Africans, Euro-Indian mestizos and Euro-African mulattos sounds a convincing argument that the Mexican American community is not a race at all. However, the concept of "homeland"<sup>1</sup>, language and culture seem to be the most prominent factors that contribute to providing Mexican Americans with the shared sense of identity. Another feature is that Mexican Americans constitute the only ethnicity in the United States which has been formed as a result of territorial expansion making a caught-in-the-middle hyphenated ethnicity "Mexican American" between the United States and Mexico. Thus, the history of Mexican Americans for the young generations is rather bewildering. This is indeed what Historian Robert Torrez found out through a conversation with a descendant of a Taoseno. The young generation thinks that their ancestors have betrayed the United States whereas the elders tell their children that their ancestors were patriotic Mexicans at war with the United States.<sup>2</sup>

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This research paper takes into account those works that bet on the success of assimilation into the American society. It emphasizes the theories of assimilation of especially Gordon Milton but only to make use of the theoretical knowledge he provides in order to explain the Melting

---

<sup>1</sup> William J. A. Darity, *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. I. (New York: The Gale Group) 9.

<sup>2</sup> Laura E. Gomez, *Manifest Destinies: The Making of the Mexican American Race*, n.d. 41

Pot theories. It also brings about the historical factor represented in the Mexican War as a decisive factor in the way the Melting Pot evolved. This paper argues that the melting pot has more to do with the first inhabitants of the occupied territories as a result of the Mexican War than with mere immigrants. The Mexican inhabitants of those lands seemed to constitute a more serious challenge to assimilation as they were deeply rooted in the land and more attracted to their culture and identity than immigrants who were more likely to secede some of their culture in favour of the American one.

## **METHODOLOGY**

As for the methodology used in this study, it is based on content analysis, ie, all data will be collected from academic literature that is relevant to the content of this research. This research adopts an analytical approach with a politico-historical dimension through which I proceed by determining the historical problem represented in the annexation of Mexican territories in 1865 and its aftermath and exposing its subsequent outcomes on the social edifice of the American population.

## **RESULTS**

With the incorporation of Mexicans, new thoughts about assimilation had to emerge provided that the term “assimilation” has conventionally been used to denote immigrants coming to the United States willingly; whereas, in the case of Mexican Americans, it is the United States which crossed the border not the Mexican people. Thus, they made a caught-in-the-middle hyphenated ethnicity “Mexican American” between the United States and Mexico. The fact remains true for those Mexicans who entered the Southwest after 1848 as their immigration could be seen as a corollary of the territorial expansion that the United States experienced during the second half of the nineteenth century. As a result, idea of Anglo-conformity went out of fashion. Assimilation into the WASP became no more an urge for Mexican Americans. The Melting Pot received much more appeal as a substitution for Anglo-conformity.

However, the Melting Pot became irrelevant metaphor to describe assimilation in the United States due to the demographic growth of some hyphenated Americans, including Mexicans, who managed to preserve their traditions and languages. Thus the terms “salad bowl”, “cookie-cutter”, “tapestry”, “mosaic” and “Pizza” emerged as a substitution for the Melting Pot and to highlight diversity rather than assimilation in the United States.

Furthermore, the Melting Pot can be seen as a sophisticated ideology whereby the United States can be seen more as a land of promises where race, religion and language should by no means stand as a barrier towards Americanness or the American Dream. Nonetheless, such ideology seems to embrace more likely immigrants looking for better opportunities and coming to the United States with the idea of the American dream than the Mexican American community who has been rooted in the American soil. Hence, the question of the validity of the term to include all ethnicities of the United States and whether there are unmeltable ethnicities arises. By virtue of the Chicana Movement, Mexican Americans are now more conscious of their past roots that they are the native inhabitants of the Southwest; and therefore, the Melting Pot is simply irrelevant to their situation.

## **DISCUSSION**

It seems that immigration does mean much more for Mexicans than it means for other immigrant communities. In addition to the fact that it is a means of the pursuit of happiness

for almost every immigrant to the United States, Mexicans often immigrate especially to the Southwest pushed by a nostalgic feeling to the region or for the sake of establishing family ties with relatives. California, for instance, is still home to 66 percent of all Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the United States; whereas the legal Mexican immigrants in New Mexico make up to 78 percent of the whole state's immigrants.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising to notice that the Southwest is heavily populated with Mexicans. The United States Census Bureau calculated that, in 2000, a staggering 29 percent, or 8.8 million, of the foreign-born population came from Mexico. Demographers with the Urban Institute in Washington, have written that Mexico is now the single largest country of immigrant origin in U.S. history. Besides this trend, the Mexican community is proved to be one of the most fertile populations in the United States with its high rate of births over deaths.<sup>4</sup> So, in the case of Mexican Americans, one could say that, to a certain extent, immigration is provoked by the territorial expansion that the United States witnessed during the second half of the nineteenth century. The Mexican government seems to have recognized this fact of late by issuing a law that gives Mexican Americans the right to hold the Mexican citizenship and to move freely through the border of US–Mexico.

Now that Mexicans constitute a unique community in that they consist of more one definite race, the question that springs to mind is to what extent does this group fit into the Melting Pot, i.e. is this group acceptable to be melted? There have been moments in the evolution of the idea of the theorists of "radical expectancy" the American society that the traditional ethnic lines such as language, culture and religion upon which the society is divided into ethnicities would disappear in favour of economic standards, that is, the American society would no more be divided into ethnicities but will be divided into classes.

Still, it is as hard to believe in such a theory as it is hard to believe that one could withdraw his memory, imagination, instincts and passions no matter what social position he acquired given that these qualities are innate; they form our character beyond our consciousness<sup>5</sup>. Thus is definitely the case of Mexican Americans. The U.S. territorial expansion experience had a deep and lasting influence on the Mexican American character. It strengthened the spirit of kinship: for some crucial period of time just after the Mexican Cession, Mexican Americans had to back out of both the American and Mexican governments. These raging sentiments still exist nowadays in the heart of many Mexican Americans on the assumption that both countries had subjugated their people: the United States by military conquest and Mexico by betrayal and desertion.<sup>6</sup>

Emphasizing the need for immigrants to abandon their cultures, including language and customs to learn and adopt the English customs and practices instead, Anglo-conformity received a flat failure especially after the civil rights movement that swept the country in the mid-1960s. The experience of the Black Americans community during the 1960s edified many Non-European groups in the United States that they could maintain their own cultures and customs and remain true Americans<sup>7</sup>. In these circumstances, the Melting Pot received

---

<sup>3</sup> Jill S. Reichman, *Immigration, Acculturation and Health: The Mexican Diaspora* (New York: LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC, 2006) 6-7.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Sollors, Werner. *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986)21.

<sup>6</sup> Andy De Los Reyos. Personal informal chat interview. 13. Oct.2010.

<sup>7</sup> Weaver, Garry R. and Adam Mandelson. *America's Midlife Crisis: The Future of a Troubled Superpower*(Boston: Intercultural Press Nicholas Brealy Publishing, 2008) 173.

much appreciation as a substitution for Anglo-Conformity. Belonging to the mainstream became no more the concern of the non-white population. The Civil Rights movement succeeded to assert the rights of Black Americans to be treated like their white counterparts regardless of any differences.<sup>8</sup> It was time to part with the ideas of Anglo-conformists forever and rethink those of the Melting Pot preachers. Those who preached that America would no more be considered a land reserved for one definite dominant culture, but a place where all immigrants should amalgamate to form a heterogeneous society.

However, the increasing numbers of Americans who maintained much of their traditions and languages made the Melting Pot an unfit metaphor to describe assimilation in America. Thus the symbols “salad bowl”, “cookie-cutter” “tapestry”, “mosaic” and “Pizza” were often used interchangeably to describe diversity in America. The symbol “salad bowl” has been used by the Department of Commerce where each vegetable adds to the salad while there is some sort of common dressing. Whereas, the symbol pizza suggests the inclusion of different ingredients which are apparent and give the whole its particular taste while still constitute one dish<sup>9</sup>. As for the artistic metaphors: tapestry and mosaic, they suggest the idea that if you remove one piece from the mosaic or one thread from the tapestry, you will endanger the beauty and construction of the whole unity.<sup>10</sup>

All in all, the Melting Pot has never been a mere symbol to represent the American society but a more sophisticated ideology that America is a land of promises and opportunity where race, religion and language should by no means hinder social mobility. Thus, the Melting Pot embraces the idea of individualism. Still many others, like Robert O Putnam who wrote “Bowling Alone”, regard the relationship of the Melting Pot and individualism with suspicion in that excessive individualism affects the democratic society. O Putnam noticed that while the number of individuals who bowl has increased in the last 20 years, the number of people who bowl in leagues has decreased dramatically.<sup>11</sup>

For some period of time, the idea of the melting pot did not differ too much from that of Anglo-conformity. It was interpreted that the different cultures blend to create a new unique hybrid culture which was theorized to “...produce the most perfect race of man that has ever appeared on earth.”<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, the American Melting Pot, historians noted, had not melted all the ingredients as entirely as it had been desired. Rather, ethnic diversity had received unprecedented appeal among many ethnicities.<sup>13</sup> The Mexican American Chicano movement is only a realistic example of those Americans who want to emphasize diversity in the United States. Mexican Americans, by virtue of the Chicana Movement are more aware now of their past roots that they did not immigrate to the U.S. Hence, the Melting Pot, which has been primarily chosen as a symbol to describe immigrants, simply does not fit the case of Mexican Americans. The quandary has played into the hands of the pro-diversity activists who think that variety and diversity in the American society should be rather regarded as a source of richness and beauty. It is simply very like colours and textures in mosaic and tapestry.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, some sociologists including David Riesman see ethnic diversity and cultural pluralism as an important measure that contributes to the safety of the country by preventing

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 57.

<sup>9</sup> Douglas K. Stevenson, American Life and Institutions (Stuttgart, 1998) 14.

<sup>10</sup> Garry R. Weaver and Adam Mandelson, op. cit., 68.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 172.

<sup>12</sup> Werner Sollors, op. cit., 100.

<sup>13</sup> John A. Carraty, The American Nation: A History of the United States, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Harper, 1975) 773.

<sup>14</sup> Garry R. Weaver and Adam Mandelson, op. cit., 173.

the curses of fascism in the United States.<sup>15</sup> In almost the same way, diversity contributes to the well-being of the society as a whole. Thus, the Melting Pot trend that all ethnicities and races should melt in the crucible came to be reversed very often by calls for emphasizing ethnicity for the sake of a more diverse society. One of the most influential proponents of such a trend is Andrew Creeley whose work on “ethnicity does matter” thesis has shown that national origin groups continue to play a major role in the United States.<sup>16</sup>

On the contrary, nativists’ views are the exact opposite of the multiculturalists’. Patrick Buchanan and Samuel Huntington think of multiculturalism as separatism whereby each group will preserve its own culture which results in conflict with the mainstream.<sup>17</sup> Still the pro-ethnic spokesmen also resist the definition of multiculturalism that “*America is the crucible in which European, Asiatics and African nationalities and peculiarities are smelted into unity*”<sup>18</sup> on the ground that such a definition contradicts ethnic diversity in the United States.<sup>19</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

Assimilation into the U.S. mainstream society has undergone several notions throughout different historical periods. The most crucial of those episodes go back to the U.S. experience of territorial experience that resulted unusually in incorporating unwillingly Mexican Americans into the American population. These elements constituted an unusual challenge to the idea of assimilation as they became American citizens against their will. The U.S. 19<sup>th</sup> century experience of expansion and the boom it caused have also motivated new waves of non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants. The latter were different from the English speaking immigrants who belonged to the old immigration. Then, there prevailed a belief that the Anglo-Saxon was on the verge of disappearance. And Anglo-conformity became the demand, one could say the requirement of belonging to the United States. However, the term, Anglo-conformity was soon to be replaced by *Americanization* during the First World War period provided the sentiments of nationalism that swept the nation during that period. Meanwhile, Mexican Americans remained far away from the requirements of Americanization due to not only ethnical factors but historical factors as well. What is worse, Anglo-conformity seemed to alter the dormant fears of racism given that it was usually carried against those groups who resisted assimilation into the English culture.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks go to Madame Chellali Fattoum.

## REFERENCES

### Books

- Carraty, John A. The American Nation: A History of the United States. 4th ed. New York: Harper, 1975.
- Gomez, Laura E. Manifest Destinies: The Making of the Mexican American Race. n.d.

---

<sup>15</sup> Werner Sollors, op. cit., 22.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Hirschman, “AMERICA’S MELTING POT RECONSIDERED,” [www.annualreviews.org/aronline](http://www.annualreviews.org/aronline)

<sup>17</sup> Garry R. Weaver and Adam Mandelson, op. cit., 171.

<sup>18</sup> Werner Sollors, op. cit., 95.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Hirschman, op. cit.

- Milton, Gordon M. Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion and National Origin. New York: Oxford UP, 1964.
- Sollors, Werner. Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture. New York: Oxford UP, 1986.
- Stevenson, Douglas K. American Life and Institutions. Stuttgart, 1998.
- Weaver, Garry R. and Adam Mandelson. America's Midlife Crisis: The Future of a Troubled Superpower. Boston: Intercultural Press Nicholas Brealy Publishing, 2008.
- Darity, William J. A. International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences. Vol. I. New York: The Gale Group.
- Reichman, Jill S. Immigration, Acculturation and Health: The Mexican Diaspora. New York: LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC, 2006.

### **Websites**

- Hirschman, Charles. "America's Meltin Pot Reconsidered." Annual Reviews. 1 February 2010 <[www.annualreviews.org/aronline](http://www.annualreviews.org/aronline)>.

### **Interviews**

- Andy De Los Reyos. Personal informal chat interview. 13. Oct.2010.