



From the Melting Pot to the Tossed Salad Metaphor: Why Coercive Assimilation Lacks the Flavors Americans Crave

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Americans love pizza, Thai food, burritos, and sushi. Our collective taste buds reflect a culinary appreciation for various cultures' foods, and by extension, the cultures that bring us these foods. However, a heightened philosophy of patriotism is currently being promoted that threatens to change our views on ethnicity, culture, and homogenize our tastes. Meanwhile, multiculturalism, where we were asked to celebrate the cultures that brought us every delicacy from samosas to goulash, is waning and being replaced by ever-conservative assimilation-oriented thinking. If this trend away from multiculturalism continues and coercive assimilation views become mainstream in America, I believe we will stifle our creative power and squelch the civil liberties that this country is built upon.

Amalgamation of materials is the process by which metals are exposed to extremely high heat until they meld into a new compound. With people, this metaphor of a melting pot has long been applied to cultural integration, especially in the case in forming the American nation. A look into the background of this social theory will help us orient ourselves in this debate. The foundation of this theory was perhaps first explained in 1782 by a French immigrant named J. Hector de Crevecoeur, who envisioned America becoming a nation comprised of a completely new race that would eventually affect changes to the world scene through its labour force and its subsequent posterity (Laubeová). The metaphor was specifically popularized in a play by Israel Zangwill, entitled "The Melting Pot," which opened in Washington

in 1908, a time when American immigration was booming from North-western Europe (Booth). This theory later appropriately came under fire when it became apparent that the mainstream public had no intention of "melting" with certain "other" races and cultures. Subsequently, American immigration policies became restrictive based on race, an example of state sponsored racism intended towards reducing the diversity of the melting pot (Laubeová). Much has been written about the so-called "myth" of the melting pot theory (Frey; Booth). However, the metaphor has persisted and epitomizes what some Americans see as an ideal model for this country.

The melting pot theory, also referred to as cultural assimilation, revolves around the analogy that "the ingredients in the pot (people of different cultures and religions) are combined so as to lose their discrete identities and yield a final product of uniform consistency and flavor, which is quite different from the original inputs" ("Melting Pot"). This idea differs from other analogies, particularly the *salad bowl* analogy where the ingredients are encouraged to retain their cultural identities, thus retaining their "integrity and flavor" while contributing to a tasty and nutritious salad ("Melting Pot"). Yet another food analogy is that of the *ethnic stew*, where there is a level of compromise between integration and cultural distinctiveness (Laubeová).

What these food analogies have in common is an appreciation that each of these ethnicities has something to contribute to the society as a whole. By comparing ethnic/cultural groups to ingredients in a recipe, we start with the assumption that each ingredient is important and the final product would not be the same if some distinct ingredient were missing. However, in the melting pot analogy, this premise is the least apparent and can be criticized for its dismissively simplistic social theories. This is one appropriate evaluation of the weaknesses of the melting pot and the tossed salad analogies:

In the case of the **melting pot** the aim is that all cultures become reflected in one common culture, however this is generally the culture of the dominant group - *I thought this was mixed vegetable soup but I can only taste tomato*. In the case of the **salad bowl**, cultural groups should exist separately and maintain their practices and institutions, however, *Where is the dressing to cover it all?* (Laubeová).

This criticism that the melting pot produces a society that primarily reflects the dominant culture instead of fusing into a completely new entity is reiterated by other sociologists, anthropologists, and cultural geographers as “Anglo-conformity” (Kivisto 151). This type of assimilation was seen as working like a one-way street and it was viewed as something that depended primarily on the cooperativeness of immigrants to be reoriented towards the dominant culture. The idea that the dominant culture would be infused with new energy through the influences of ethnic groups retaining their distinctive cultural attributes and thereby forging a new, stronger America due to their divergent cultural contributions was not given much weight by early researchers (Kivisto 152-154).

It should be noted in this discussion that earlier in American sociology history, some of these terms took on distinctly different flavours. This ambiguity of terminology contributes to confusion in the current discourse. For instance, in 1901, Sarah Simons is quoted as making this conclusion with regards to assimilation:

In brief, the function of assimilation is the establishment of homogeneity within the group; but this does not mean that all variation shall be crushed out. In vital matters, such as language, ideals of government, law, and education, uniformity shall prevail; in personal matters of religion and habits of life, however, individuality shall be allowed free play. Thus, the spread of “consciousness of kind” must be accompanied by the spread of consciousness of individuality (qtd. in Kivisto 153).

Furthermore, according to Peter Kivisto’s interpretation of Chicago School sociologist Robert E. Park’s writings on the subject, theories on assimilation originally differed from the melting pot fusion theory in that assimilation “signals the proliferation of diversity. Rather than enforced conformity, it makes possible a greater degree of individual autonomy” and creates “a cultural climate that is predicated by pluralism” whereby this “cultural pluralism (or multiculturalism) can coexist with assimilation” (156-157). The idea that a multiethnic society could attain an interdependent cohesion based on national solidarity while maintaining distinct cultural histories not dependent on like-minded homogeneity was thus proposed back in the early 1900’s (Kivisto 161).

However, it is vital to recognize that coercive assimilation theorists often do not support the idea that immigrants should maintain distinct cultural attributes. In the modern-day discussion, coercive

assimilation theories often take on a decidedly racist overtone (Laubeová), with many assimilation proponents urging Americentric policies such as English-only education, strict immigration policies, stipulations of nationalistic criteria for citizenship, and eliminating programs aimed at helping minorities (Booth; Hayworth). This issue over terminology and social metaphors is vitally important because America stands at a critical ideological turning point. Cultural geographers describe our current society as experiencing a “multicultural backlash” that will drastically affect immigration legislation and ethnic studies and possibly lead us towards a more restrictive and intolerant nation (Mitchell 641). The current discourse about cultural assimilation seeks to relegate incongruent cultural attributes to the private arena so as not to disturb the dominant society (Mitchell 642), and instead of promoting a tolerance of diversity, we see the modern-day assimilation proponents urging strict deportation and increasingly restrictive immigration policies in order to protect so-called American values (Hayworth).

Some proponents, such as Arizona Congressman J.D. Hayworth, are calling for a return of the same type of assimilation policies that others refer to as the “humiliating Americanization programs of the 1910’s and 1920’s” (Rodriguez). Those programs occurred during another time of heightened national concern, namely WWI and the subsequent “Red Scare,” where coercive education and employment policies were enacted that compelled immigrants to assimilate. This assimilation process was structured to produce citizens that conformed, not just to American democratic ideals, but also to Americanized private habits, American English, and basic political and social ideologies intended to create a pliable work force and ensure certain political leanings (“Americanization” [1]). During the war, immigrants experienced oppression, xenophobia, and propaganda designed to strip them of their native cultures and loyalties. The public school system “instructed the children of immigrants in “proper” Anglo-Saxon values and traditions and strongly encouraged them to take their lessons home to their families (“Americanization” [2]) Meanwhile, ethnic presses were scrutinized and inspected by the U.S. government and higher financial burdens were placed upon them from the U.S. Postal Service, who demanded to analyze translations, effectively limiting their freedom of speech and eventually resulting in many presses closing (“Americanization” [2]).

After the war, the leftover social strains and extreme patriotism gave vent for new obsessions, including the Red Scare over suspected communists,

resurgence in the white supremacist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan, religiously based fundamentalism, labor strikes, and the prohibition of alcohol (“Americanization” [2]). Certainly, civil liberties were being cast aside, and minority groups bore the brunt of this assault under the guise of becoming more “American” and less “foreign.” Now we are seeing a similar leaning towards coercive assimilation spreading across America due to the heightened concern over terrorism and the cultural/religious differences that are perceived to be behind that ideological discord. If this assimilation thinking proceeds toward its logical conclusion, America will move backwards socially and become a truly bland melted pot of cultures that is willing to sacrifice everything under a misplaced paradigm of patriotism.

The stance of many coercive assimilation proponents smacks of racist overtones and is based on apprehension of “others” and exclusionary thinking more than it is based on preservation of core values. For example, in the case of the political debate over designating English as America’s official language, Thomas Ricento makes this point:

The English language has often been used as a marker of one’s “American-ness”, and the use of non-English languages as a marker to one’s “foreign-ness.” Penalizing non-English speakers by limiting their access to public services, voting and education is illogical, for it would *further* stigmatize non-English speakers, rather than help them acquire the language. . . Restricting access of citizens and non-citizens alike because of a language barrier is not only bad public policy, but an insult and a calculated provocation, the initial step would certainly be a protracted conflict between English and non-English speakers (7).

The implications of this type of proposed legislation drives fear into minority groups seeking to preserve their cultural heritage against a tide of Americentric propaganda. Ultimately, those seeking to enact coercive assimilation policies threaten to fracture the common ground of the American dream that they claim to be focused on protecting. Minority groups are nearing such numbers in this country that it is projected that the word “minority” will soon become obsolete. Enacting exclusionary policies will only fracture an already delicate social framework and potentially further disenfranchise the very groups America needs for inclusive unity.

On the other hand, multiculturalism has its own set of weak points that need further evaluation and revision. The melting pot and the tossed salad metaphors are both inherently flawed, at least so far in their practical application. On this, there are many social theorists who are writing about a compromise between the melting pot approach and the tossed salad analogy. One such new theory is the aforementioned “ethnic stew” from Laura Laubeová, who hopes that such an analogy can help bridge the gap between the two concepts to create “a sort of pan-Hungarian goulash *where the pieces of different kinds of meat still keep their solid structure.*” Indeed, some sort of compromise between full assimilation and multiculturalism will be necessary to retain our multiethnic flavour while building a cohesive society.

The bottom line is that people are people, not food. Despite the variety of food metaphors at our disposal, the power of this rhetoric is limited and wears thin during pragmatic application. Food metaphors can be useful, but we do not need more vague metaphors that lead to interpretive disparities. What we need is an entirely new dialogue on the subject, one that completely and clearly redefines America’s objective for a multiethnic society that allows for diversity, not just in the private realm, but also in the public sphere. We do not need a coercive assimilation program that reverts back to outdated nationalistic paranoia. We need an inclusive working social theory that unites the disparate enclaves of this society into a manageable entity moving in the same collective direction. Whether Americans will ever eventually be reformed into what Israel Zangwill called “a fusion of all races” remains to be seen (Zangwill). Right now, what America needs is a definitive social direction that leans away from coercive assimilation dogma and towards a truly inclusive national identity. True American dreamers should not settle for anything less.

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