Americanization, argues education historian Jeffrey Mirel in *Patriotic Pluralism*, both the process and the term, has been widely misunderstood and too narrowly interpreted in the literature and scholarship on the assimilation of the American immigrant. The iconic picture is that of the melting pot, literally interpreted, as in the ceremony that capped Americanization education in the Ford Motor Company in the 1920s: immigrants, dressed in traditional costume, lined up to walk into a stage-set melting pot, to emerge on the other side identically dressed. In this view, immigrants were to be stripped of language, customs, national identities, to become like all other Americans, who were assumed to be near-identical. Such a ceremony did take place and it did epitomize one version of Americanization, but that was only one version, and the most extreme.

Mirel’s correction of the traditional picture comes about through a close examination of the schooling of immigrant school children and Americanization education for immigrant workers in Chicago, Cleveland, and Detroit, all major concentrations of immigrants in the early 20th century. He draws evidence from an enormous mass of translations of editorials and articles from the immigrant press in Chicago and Cleveland, made by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in the late 1930s and early 1940s. (The WPA also played a key role in the education of immigrant adults in the run-up to World War II, supporting naturalization classes in English and American government.)

The curriculum for children was far from the “multiculturalism” of recent decades. This education was nevertheless in the liberal spirit, as Mirel notes in making an important distinction: the education of immigrant children was in “civic nationalism,” not “ethnic nationalism.” The latter insisted that Americanism must have a distinctive ethnic base and disparaged the new immigrants as ethnically so different from the mass of 19th-century Americans as to make them incapable of becoming good Americans. Civic nationalism, in contrast, insists that anyone can become a good American, for Americanism depends on loyalty to principles rather than some specific ethnicity. Mirel is clearly on the side of civic nationalism. Despite the triumph of ethnic nationalists in the new immigration legislation of the 1920s, educators and their allies “ignored the restrictionists’ view about the uneducability of the immigrants and persisted in using the schools and the other educational venues to Americanize immigrants and their children…. These programs would produce tens of thousands of new citizens who embraced in varying degrees the values of civic nationalism they had been taught.”

Teachers and curricula in Chicago, Detroit, and Cleveland in effect assumed the new immigrant children were capable of becoming good Americans and provided them with the kind of education that would make them so. “The reading programs for elementary students…immersed children in the western literary tradition…from their earliest years…. Detroit educators introduced simplified versions of ‘classic myths and fairy tales’…Suggested reading for first grade included several of Aesop’s fables; the stories of Cinderella, Red Riding Hood and Sleeping Beauty; some of Joel Chandler Harris’s Uncle Remus tales; brief biographies of Columbus, Washington, and Lincoln; … poems by … Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. For fourth grade, educators recommended stories from Homer’s Odyssey, Washington Irving’s ‘Rip Van Winkle,’ Howard Pyle’s adventures of Robin Hood, and biographies of Magellan, De Soto, and William Penn.” They were being inducted into becoming Americans, as that was understood at the time.

The foreign-language press, in Mirel’s analysis, fully supported the efforts of the schools. It encouraged the learning of English; it also encouraged naturalization, and not only because of its practical benefits (protection from deportation in the Red Scare of the 1920s, for example). The foreign-language press supported America’s role in World War II, even if the countries we fought against were the homelands of many immigrants; it steadily educated immigrant readers in American history, and through the parents...
also tried to educate the children. It linked America’s heroes to homeland heroes who fought in American wars. Thaddeus Kosciusko, who fought as a colonel in the Revolutionary War before leading Poland’s 1794 uprising against imperial Russia, makes many an appearance in the Polish press, for example. It is noted not only that he had the same birthday as Lincoln (Lincoln was a particular favorite of the immigrant press—he was because of his humble background seen by the immigrants as a welcoming figure who valued their contribution to America), but also that in his will “Kosciusko requested that the large tracts of land he received for his service in the Revolutionary War be used to help end slavery.” Mirel notes that, while the immigrant press was enthusiastic about America and its freedoms, it could also criticize Washington and Jefferson as slaveholders: but this criticism, too, was clearly an education in Americanism for its readers.

Mirel extends the story beyond the period of mass immigration into the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, when a new form of Americanization education emerged in the intercultural education movement. Here the African American for the first time enters the story in a significant way: the mission of intercultural education was not only tolerance for immigrant minorities but also for America’s blacks. Despite the uniqueness of the black experience, blacks were incorporated into intercultural education as another minority group.

Tolerance, the goal of intercultural education, does not seem much to ask for when we look back from our age of multiculturalism, which calls for much more. But in its time it was an advance. “Patriotic pluralism” is a good description of what education in Americanism became: it assimilated immigrants yet taught all Americans more than tolerance for the culture that immigrants brought, and the culture that blacks had created here in America. Had Mirel extended his story into the last few decades, I am sure he would also have corrected today’s overly narrow view of “assimilation,” which does not require the loss of all distinctive identity, and of “multiculturalism,” which, except in its most excessive forms, also teaches appreciation of American freedoms.

Americanization has meant acquiring citizenship, enlisting and fighting in the American army in World War II, and embracing American patriotism, while accepting the retention of language, religion, and attachment to another identity, and finding no contradiction in this amalgam. Many great American leaders defined Americanization as including all that. Franklin Delano Roosevelt commended immigrants who “may still retain their affection for some of the things they left behind—old customs, old languages, old friends,” and “wove into the pattern of American life some of the color, some of the richness of the cultures from which they came…. We gave them freedom. I am proud—America is proud—of what they have given to us…. They have never been—they are not now—half-hearted Americans.” These are sentiments every American president since could have embraced.

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