

The Melting Pot, the Orchestra and American Diversity

[Review of *Horace M. Kallen a vývoj americké kulturní identity*, edited by Josef Jařab, translated by Michaela Weiß (Olomouc: Periplum, 2013)]

The publication *Horace M. Kallen a vývoj americké kulturní identity* [Horace M. Kallen and the development of an American cultural identity] present to Czech readers four essays concerning the issues of American assimilationism, cultural pluralism, and multiculturalism in a historical perspective. The book opens with short biographical sketches on Horace M. Kallen and Randolph S. Bourne and then provides Czech translations of two essays - Kallen's "Democracy Versus the Melting-Pot" and Bourne's "Trans-National America." Further it includes two contemporary essays on the topic by Czech American studies scholars, Michaela Weiß of the Salesian University in Opava, who specializes in American Jewish literature, and Josef Jařab, Professor of English and American Literature at Palacký University, Olomouc, former chairman of the Czech and Slovak Association for American Studies and former President of the European Association of American Studies. Professor Jařab is universally acknowledged as the founder of modern American Studies in the Czech lands.

The year 2015 will mark the hundred-year anniversary of the publication of Horace M. Kallen's groundbreaking work "Democracy Versus the Melting-Pot." Originally published during a time in which Nativism was flourishing and the assimilation or Americanization of immigrant populations was valorized over linguistic and cultural difference, Kallen called instead for an appreciation of cultural diversity. The metaphor of the melting pot, popularized by Israel Zangwill's play of the same name, expresses the belief (and, for some, desire) that once newcomers from all corners of the world enter the USA, they are transformed (melted) into one homogenous American nation. In one of the most often quoted passages of *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur perhaps for the first time expresses this sentiment: "Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of man."¹

In his essay, Kallen outlines the history of immigration to America, points to the achievements of non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants and generally appreciates the diversity they brought to American culture. Instead of the melting pot, he compares the USA to an orchestra in which each instrument has its specific timbre although together they create one symphony. Despite the fact that his metaphor of the orchestra includes neither Afro-Americans nor Native Americans, Kallen, as a pioneering theorist of cultural pluralism, helped to open the road for multiculturalism in the second half of the 20th century.

In his essay on Kallen's concept of cultural pluralism, Jařab states that Kallen's failure to include all races in his "American symphony" is quite striking, as he published *Culture and Democracy in the United States*² in 1924, at the time of the flourishing of the Harlem Renaissance, in the "true jazz age" which peaked in the publication of *The New Negro* anthology (1925) compiled by Kallen's student Alain Locke.³ Jařab concludes that

1 J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, "Letters from an American Farmer," in *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, ed. Paul Lauter, vol. 2 (Lexington, D.C. Heath & Co., 1990), 897.

2 The publication included reprints of five essays published between 1915 and 1924.

3 See Josef Jařab, "Mezi tavicím kotlem, kulturním pluralismem a multikulturalismem," (Into the melting pot, cultural pluralism and multiculturalism) in *Horace M. Kallen a vývoj americké kulturní identity*, ed. Josef Jařab (Olomouc, Periplum, 2013), 134.

this exclusion was likely the result of the influence of Kallen's conservative Harvard teacher and colleague William Barrett: "Kallen did not find enough courage to overcome the racial barrier dividing America at the time quite clearly even outside of the truly and legally segregated South."⁴ Kallen probably had in mind the preservation of his own ethnic tradition, that of the Central European Judaism.⁵ Jařab contrasts Kallen's silence during the 1920s on the issue of non-white races with the sensitivity of the Czech composer Antonín Dvořák, who as early as the 1890s considered Afro-American and Native American folklore and rhythm as the future source of American music in his article "Music in America" published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in 1895.

Further in his essay, Jařab mentions other concepts concerned with America as immigrant and pluralist country – the historian Marcus Lee Hansen and his rule of the three immigrant generations (*The Problem of the Third Generation of Immigrants*, 1987), applied to American society in general by the anthropologist Margaret Mead, and Oscar Handlin as the historian of American immigration. On the other side, he mentions the Immigration Act of 1924 which, based on a national origins quota, severely limited immigration to US along with the racist ideas of eugenicist Madison Grant (author of *The Passing of the Great Race*, 1916) therefore placing Kallen's into a broader context of his adversaries and followers. Kallen's cultural pluralism is then viewed as predecessor of the civil rights movements of the 1960s and of multiculturalism of the last decades of the 20th century.

Among the immediate followers of Kallen's ideas, Randolph Bourne in particular stands out. His 1916 essay "Trans-National America" forms the second chapter. Perhaps because of his own fate of chronic ill health and physical deformity, Bourne was very sensitive and receptive not only to his own tradition, but to all marginalized people within American society. He also opposed the concept of Americanization, referring to it as a project of the Brahmins created to maintain the Anglo-Saxon cultural dominance over minorities. Bourne concluded that despite all the forces of Americanization, immigrants did not turn into a homogenous American nation but to a significant degree preserved their own cultural heritage despite being loyal and cooperative citizens. Bourne believed that American nationality was not a completed project, but was in constant progress and that America could become the first universal nation with a trans-national or cosmopolitan identity.

Michaela Weiß's essay provides a different kind of historical and cultural context for the Kallen's and Bourne's texts by focusing on the Jewish-American search for cultural roots and identity along with the ensuing conflict between those who reified the melting pot concept and those who favored the idea of cultural pluralism. Well written and grounded in primary reading, Weiß's essay outlines the history of Jewish migration to the US and the changes it brought both to the immigrants and their beliefs (including for example the Reform Movement in Judaism, which attempted to reconcile American and Jewish identity, represented among others by Czech-born Isaac Mayer Wise⁶). She also maps the waves of Jewish immigrations, paying particular attention to the tense relationships of the American Sephardi and German Jews towards Eastern European Ashkenazi Jews at the turn of the century.⁷ Defining and explaining the concepts of

4 Jařab, "Mezi tavicím kotlem," 134. (My translation.)

5 See Jařab, "Mezi tavicím kotlem," 134.

6 Michaela Weiß, "Kulturní pluralismus versus tavicí kotel: počátky hledání americké (židovské) identity," [Cultural pluralism versus melting pot: the origins of the search for an American (Jewish) identity] in *Horace M. Kallen a vývoj americké kulturní identity*, ed. Josef Jařab (Olomouc, Periplum, 2013), 67.

7 See Weiß, "Kulturní pluralismus," 69.

Sionism and Hebraism, Weiß introduces the ideas of Mordecai Manuel Noah and Emma Lazarus on American Jewish identity. She points out that this is precisely the period when Judaism (or Jewishness) turns from a religious phase to a more ethnic one, i.e. it stresses the shared historical and cultural tradition over purely religious affiliation.⁸ Weiß then proceeds to placing Kallen into this intellectual context and discussing his views on identity and comparing them with those of Chaim Zhitlowsky, Ludwig Lewisohn, and Randolph Bourne. In the second part of her text, Weiß turns her attention to works of art reflecting the issues of assimilation and pluralism, analyzing for instance Abraham Cahan's fiction (particularly *The Rise of David Levinski*, 1917). Regarding Zangwill's play *The Melting Pot* (1908, printed 1909), Weiß points out that Zangwill understood the process of cultural coalescence in religious terms,⁹ claiming that the true American is still being made: "He is only in the Crucible [...] he will be the fusion of all races, perhaps the coming superman."¹⁰ An analysis of Edward Alfred Steiner's autobiographical writing is given as an example of immigrant literature which purposefully tried to show to American readers that their country was not flooded by alien hordes but by human beings who were seeking the same freedom as the Pilgrim Fathers.¹¹ As the prototype of the immigrant novel, Mary Antin's *The Promised Land* (1912) is analyzed stressing its acceptance of assimilation as accommodation of immigrants into the new land. The essay concludes with the legacy of Kallen's search for American identity and of his concept of cultural pluralism.

The book is a very welcome and needed contribution to American Studies in our country. It makes available the foundational texts of American theories of cultural pluralism to Czech readers and provides both a well-structured and detailed period context of the theories as well as discusses their impact on American culture and their evolving legacy. The publication would be even more generally beneficial if its theme was not so narrowly focused mostly on American Jewish identity but also embraced views regarding other minorities (especially Asian-Americans are unfortunately completely neglected). Despite its somewhat limited focus, the book is a must for all students of American culture and literature as well as of political science. Although published some hundred years ago in the USA, both Kallen's and Bourne's essays are topical for contemporary Czech readers for yet another reason – because they voice some of the general issues of co-habitation of various cultures within one state, issues which are more and more pressing today in our Czech and European contexts.

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8 See Weiß, "Kulturní pluralismus," 80.

9 See Weiß, "Kulturní pluralismus," 103.

10 Israel Zangwill, *The Melting-Pot* (New York: The American Jewish Book Company, 1921). The Project Gutenberg EBook of *The Melting-Pot*. Accessed October 10, 2014.
<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/23893/23893-h/23893-h.htm>

11 See Weiß, "Kulturní pluralismus," 111.