

What Does It Take to ‘Assimilate’ in America?

By Laila Lalami

- Aug. 1, 2017

Credit...Photo illustration by Derek Brahney

By Laila Lalami

- Aug. 1, 2017

“The problem is,” my seatmate said, “they don’t assimilate.” We were about 30,000 feet in the air, nearly an hour from our destination, and I was beginning to regret the turn our conversation had taken. It started out as small talk. He told me he owned a butcher shop in Gardena, about 15 miles south of Los Angeles, but was contemplating retirement. I knew the area well, having lived nearby when I was in graduate school, though I hadn’t been there in years. “Oh, it’s changed a lot,” he told me. “We have all those Koreans now.” Ordinarily, my instinct would have been to return to the novel I was reading, but this was just two months after the election, and I was still trying to parse for myself what was happening in the country. “They have their own schools,” he said. “They send their kids there on Sundays so they can learn Korean.”

What does assimilation mean these days? The word has its roots in the Latin “simulare,” meaning to make similar. Immigrants are expected, over an undefined period, to become like other Americans, a process metaphorically described as a melting pot. But what this means, in practice, remains unsettled. After all, Americans have always been a heterogeneous population — racially, religiously, regionally. By what criteria is an outsider judged to fit into such a diverse nation?

For some, assimilation is based on pragmatic considerations, like achieving some fluency in the dominant language, some educational or economic success, some familiarity with the country’s history and culture. For others, it runs deeper and involves relinquishing all ties, even linguistic ones, to the old country. For yet others, the whole idea of assimilation is wrongheaded, and integration — a dynamic process that retains the connotation of individuality — is seen as the better model. Think salad bowl, rather than melting pot: Each ingredient keeps its flavor, even as it mixes with others.

It is individualized and based on perspective .. so how do we then measure adopting culture?

Whichever model they prefer, Americans pride themselves on being a nation of immigrants. Starting in 1903, people arriving at Ellis Island were greeted by a copper statue whose pedestal bore the words, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” One of this country’s most cherished myths is the idea that, no matter where you come from, if you work hard, you can be successful. But these ideals have always been combined with a deep suspicion of newcomers.

In 1890, this newspaper ran an article explaining that while “the red and black assimilate” in New York, “not so the Chinaman.” Cartoons of the era depicted Irish refugees as drunken apes and Chinese immigrants as cannibals swallowing Uncle Sam. At different times, the United States barred or curtailed the arrival of Chinese, Italian, Irish, Jewish and, most recently, Muslim immigrants. During the Great Depression, as many as one million Mexicans and Mexican-Americans were deported under the pretext that they were to blame for the economic downturn.

ADVERTISEMENT

[Continue reading the main story](#)

The pendulum between hope and fear continues to swing today. “We are a country where people of all backgrounds, all nations of origin, all languages, all religions, all races, can make a home,” Hillary Clinton told an immigrant-advocacy conference in New York in 2015. By contrast, Donald Trump warned on the campaign trail that “not everyone who seeks to join our country will be able to successfully assimilate.” Last November, one of these visions of assimilation won out.

Immigrants contribute to America in a million different ways, from growing the food on our tables to creating the technologies we use every day. They commit far fewer crimes than native-born citizens. But hardly a week goes by when poor assimilation isn’t blamed for offenses involving immigrants — and the entire project of immigration called into question. In Michigan, an Indian-American emergency-room doctor who belongs to the Dawoodi Bohra community, a Shiite Muslim sect, was charged with performing female genital mutilation on several young girls. In Minnesota, a black police officer, the first Somali-American cop in his precinct, shot an unarmed Australian woman. Both incidents were immediately seized upon by the far right as examples of the inability — or refusal — of Muslims to assimilate. So far this year, American police officers have killed more than 500 people, but for the commentator Ann Coulter, the shooting in Minnesota would never have happened in Australia because “they have fewer than 10k Somalis. We have >100k.” Earlier this month, the Fox News personality Tucker Carlson ran a segment in which he said citizens of a small town in Pennsylvania claimed that several dozen Roma who had been resettled there “defecate in public, chop the heads off chickens, leave trash everywhere.” (The police

said they issued citations where relevant.) “The group doesn’t seem at all interested in integrating,” Carlson complained. “You have to assume it’s a statement.”

Sign up for The New York Times Magazine Newsletter The best of The New York Times Magazine delivered to your inbox every week, including exclusive feature stories, photography, columns and more. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

One reason immigration is continuously debated in America is that there is no consensus on whether assimilation should be about national principles or national identity. Those who believe that assimilation is a matter of principle emphasize a belief in the Constitution and the rule of law; in life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; and in a strong work ethic and equality. Where necessary, they support policy changes to further deter any cultural customs that defy those values. For example, Rick Snyder, the governor of Michigan, signed a new law that increases existing penalties for anyone who performs female genital mutilation on a minor.

ADVERTISEMENT

[Continue reading the main story](#)

But for those who believe that assimilation is a matter of identity — as many on the far right do — nothing short of the abandonment of all traces of your heritage will do. The alt-right pundit Milo Yiannopoulos, an immigrant himself, told a campus group in January that “the hijab is not something that should ever be seen on American women.” The perception that visible signs of religious identity are indicators of deep and sinister splits in society can lead to rabid fears of wholly imaginary threats. Several states have passed anti-Shariah measures, in fear that Muslims will seek to impose their own religious laws on unsuspecting Americans. The fact that Muslims make up 1 percent of the U.S. population and that such an agenda is both a statistical and a Constitutional impossibility has done nothing to temper this fear. It is no longer a fringe belief: The white nationalist Richard Spencer told a reporter that he once bonded with Stephen Miller, now a senior White House adviser, over concerns that immigrants from non-European countries were not assimilating.

Debates about assimilation are different from debates about undocumented immigration, even though they are often mixed together. Concerns about undocumented immigration typically center on competition for jobs or the use of public resources, but complaints about assimilation are mostly about identity — a nebulous mix of race, religion and language. In May, a survey by the Public Religion Research Institute and The Atlantic found that white working-class voters were 3.5 times more likely to support Donald Trump if they reported feeling “like a stranger in their own land.” My seatmate on that airplane was a small-business owner, yet he did not seem worried about Korean-Americans taking business away from him; he seemed more aggrieved that their children studied two languages, or that his community featured store signs and church marquees in an alphabet he could not read. Others might object

to their neighbors' wearing skullcaps, or eating fermented duck eggs, or listening to Tejano music — and call these concerns about assimilation, too.

It should be clear by now that assimilation is primarily about power. In Morocco, where I was born, I never heard members of Parliament express outrage that French immigrants — or “expats,” as they might call themselves — eat pork, drink wine or have extramarital sex, in plain contradiction of local norms. If they do adopt the country's customs or speak its language, they aren't said to have “assimilated” but to have “gone native.” In France, by contrast, politicians regularly lament that people descended from North African immigrants choose halal food options for school lunches or want to attend classes in head scarves. One result is a daily experience of rejection, which only makes assimilation more difficult.

America is different from Europe in one significant way: It has a long and successful history of integrating its immigrants, even if each new generation thinks that the challenges it faces are unique and unprecedented. It is a nation in which people will wear green on St. Patrick's Day without thinking much about the periods during which the Irish were accused of contaminating the nation with their foreign habits. Because there is no objective measure of assimilation, many people end up throwing up their hands and saying, “I know it when I see it.” The question is: Who is doing the judging here?

Laila Lalami is the author, most recently, of “The Moor's Account,” a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

Sign up for [our newsletter](#) to get the best of The New York Times Magazine delivered to your inbox every week.