

## CHAPTER ONE

# The Paradox of Assimilation

There is a limit to our powers of assimilation, and when it is exceeded, the country suffers from something like indigestion.


—*New York Times*, May 15, 1880<sup>1</sup>

My culture is a very dominant culture, and it's imposing and causing problems. If you don't do something about it, you're going to have taco trucks on every corner.

—Marco Gutierrez, founder of Latinos for Trump,  
September 1, 2016<sup>2</sup>

### ASSIMILATION'S PREHISTORY

Dr. Pierce's Golden Medical Discovery and Pleasant Pellets were patent medicines manufactured in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries at the World's Dispensary Medical Association in Buffalo, New York. Made with queen's root, bloodroot, mandrake root, and other ostensibly mystical ingredients, they were advertised as elixirs of "simple herbs" that could improve "nutritional assimilation," thereby remedying loss of appetite, fatigue, nervousness, and other maladies.<sup>3</sup> In a newspaper advertisement for these products from 1898, a Native American man wearing a loincloth and a long, feathered headdress is depicted hurling a tomahawk into the air (see figure 1). "Before he was debauched by modern civilization," the ad proclaims, "the American



In J. Fenimore Cooper's *Leather Stocking Tales*, we read stories of the wonderful agility, physical endurance and the unerring accuracy of the eye of the American Indian when he reigned supreme over this continent. Before he was debauched by modern civilization, he was a magnificent specimen of physical manhood. He lived entirely in the open air, and knew no medicine, save the simple herbs gathered by his squaws.

Civilized man leads an unnatural and an unhealthy life. Unlike the Indian if he would maintain his physical and mental health, he must take reasonable precautions to combat disease. Nearly all diseases have their inception in disorders of the digestion, torpidity of the liver and impurity of the blood. Dr. Pierce's Golden Medical Discovery is made of simple herbs. It restores the lost appetite, makes digestion and assimilation perfect, invigorates the liver, purifies the blood and promotes the natural processes of excretion and secretion. It sends the rich, red, life-giving blood bounding through the arteries and corrects all circulatory disturbances. It dispels headaches, nervousness, drowsiness, lassitude, and drives out all impurities and disease germs. It cures 95 per cent. of all cases of consumption, bronchitis, asthma and diseases of the air-passages. It gives sound and refreshing sleep, drives away all bodily and mental fatigue and imparts vigor and health to every organ of the body. Medicine dealers sell it, and have nothing else, "just as good."

"A few of my symptoms," writes Charles Book, of Climax, Kalamazoo Co., Mich. "were heart-burn, fullness after eating, pain in my bowels, bad taste in my mouth, and occasional fever and hot flashes. Dr. Pierce's Golden Medical Discovery cured all these and I am perfectly well."

Dr. Pierce's Pleasant Pellets are sure, speedy and permanent cure for constipation. One little "Pellet" is a gentle laxative and two a mild cathartic. They never gripe. Found at all medicine stores.

Figure 1. Advertisement for Dr. Pierce's Golden Medical Discovery and Pleasant Pellets. *The Rural New-Yorker*, November 5, 1898. Used with permission from American Agriculturalist. Copyright Informa.

Indian . . . was a magnificent specimen of physical manhood. He lived entirely in the open air, and knew no medicine, save the simple herbs gathered by his squaws."<sup>4</sup> A "real" Indian, Dr. Pierce's American Indian is unspoiled and unassimilated.<sup>5</sup>

The ad for Dr. Pierce's Golden Medical Discovery and Pleasant Pellets sheds light on assimilation's multiple meanings. It also presages the ongoing contest over this term's significance. In addition to referring to a process of becoming more alike, *assimilation*, in its most general sense, refers to a process of absorbing. For example, as early as the seventeenth century it could mean digestion, the "absorption of nutriment into the system."<sup>6</sup> However, over time assimilation took on new, politically charged meaning in the United States as social groups moved through space and came into contact with one another—for instance, as the nation-cum-empire stretched across and beyond the

North American continent; as the US government and its agents broke up tribal lands and removed Native Americans from their homes and communities; as African Americans relocated from the rural South to the urban North; and as immigrants from all parts of the globe arrived at the nation's ports of entry.

By the start of the twentieth century, assimilation referred not only to a biological or physiological process but also to a social and cultural one. In 1894 economist Richmond Mayo-Smith defined assimilation as the "mixture of nationalities" that resulted from immigration to the United States.<sup>7</sup> Signaling that the concept had indeed moved beyond the natural and biological sciences, sociologist Sarah E. Simons observed in 1901 that "[w]riters on historical and social science" were "just beginning to turn their attention to the large subject of assimilation."<sup>8</sup> "[I]n the future treatises on assimilation will form vast libraries," she predicted.<sup>9</sup> Thirteen years later, Robert Ezra Park, considered by many scholars to be "one of the giants of early American sociology," connected assimilation's old and new meanings.<sup>10</sup> "By a process of nutrition, somewhat similar to the physiological one," he wrote, "we may conceive alien peoples to be incorporated with, and made part of the community or state."<sup>11</sup>

As these early social scientific definitions underscore, assimilation has been associated with immigration in the United States since the late nineteenth century. Yet the ad for Dr. Pierce's products offers a glimpse of what I call assimilation's prehistory, of some of the term's meanings before it was connected to immigrants and immigration. In addition to referring to a physiological and biological process, assimilation was used synonymously with "civilization" through the early twentieth century. As the opposite of savagery and barbarism, as an "achieved social order or way of life," and as a "modern social process" whose "effects [are] reckoned as good, bad or mixed," civilization is a conceptual precursor of assimilation as social and cultural process.<sup>12</sup>

Along with African Americans, Native Americans once played a salient role in conversations about assimilation. Examining the

connection between civilization and assimilation brings that role into relief. In the Civilization Fund Act of 1819, the US Congress charged “capable persons of good moral character” with imparting “the habits and arts of civilization” to Native Americans.<sup>13</sup> Sixty years later, on the cusp of what is known in federal Indian history as the allotment and assimilation era (1887–1943), Richard Henry Pratt set out to civilize and, as he put it, to “citizenize” indigenous youth when he founded the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, the first federally funded, coeducational, off-reservation boarding school in the United States.<sup>14</sup> As I discuss in chapter 2, Carlisle was one in a long line of colonial educational institutions that sought to “civilize” nonwhite peoples in and beyond the continental United States by subordinating them. Pratt modeled Carlisle after the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute, a school for African Americans and one of the first historically black colleges and universities. He upheld the deracination of African slaves and their US-born descendants as a model for civilizing Native Americans. In other words, he believed that Native Americans could be assimilated if they, too, were plucked from their homes and forced to live with white Americans. He described the process of civilizing so-called backward races as “assimilation under duress.”<sup>15</sup>

While “backward” races were seen as in need of civilizing, they were formally excluded from the polity. That is, they could be civilized, but they could not be citizens, at least not until 1868, when the Fourteenth Amendment granted US citizenship to “[a]ll persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof.”<sup>16</sup> The first statute to codify naturalization law in the United States, the Naturalization Act of 1790, restricted US citizenship to free white persons. The Fourteenth Amendment transformed African Americans into US citizens, at least in name, but it did not apply to Native Americans. In 1924 the Indian Citizenship Act (also known as the Snyder Act) extended US citizenship to them.

Yet before the Snyder Act was passed, Native Americans had to prove that they were worthy of US citizenship. For instance, the Dawes Act

of 1887 and the Burke Act of 1906 held out the promise of US citizenship to Native Americans, but only after a probationary period of twenty-five years. During that probation, Native Americans who aspired to be US citizens had to live “separate and apart from any tribe of Indians.”<sup>17</sup> What is more, they had to demonstrate that they had “adopted the habits of civilized life” and were “competent and capable of managing [their] affairs.”<sup>18</sup> In short, assimilation was a transactional trial. As Pratt’s motto, “Kill the Indian . . . and save the man,” stressed, the price for civilization and citizenship was the Indian’s very Indianness.<sup>19</sup>

#### ASSIMILATION THEORY: ETHNICITY AND RACE

As the meanings of civilization and assimilation diverged over the course of the twentieth century, assimilation came to be associated more with people recognized as immigrants and less with Native Americans and African Americans. Assimilation and immigration were conjoined via such concepts as *Americanization*, the metamorphosis from non-American to American; *Anglo-conformity*, the dissolution of the immigrant or minority group’s culture by an Anglo-Protestant mainstream; *acculturation*, adaptation to a different culture, often the dominant one; *incorporation*, the union of two or more things into one body (and sometimes, a synonym for naturalization); and *integration*, the inclusion of different cultures or groups in society, often or presumably as equals (and the opposite of segregation). Like civilization, some of these terms—in particular, Americanization and Anglo-conformity—connote the imposition and presumed superiority of one way of life, the American and Anglo-American, over another.

Theories and models of assimilation say just as much about how society and the nation are perceived—however idealized—as they do about the putative processes by which people are absorbed into or adapt to that society and nation. For example, assimilation as Anglo-conformity assumes that the majority of Americans are “chiefly of Anglo-Saxon extraction,” “Caucasian racial stock,” and “the Protestant

faith.” Assimilation into the white Anglo-Protestant “dominant culture group” is unidirectional.<sup>20</sup> This framework tends to be associated with “[e]arly assimilation scholars.”<sup>21</sup> It is widely perceived to have been abandoned “[w]hen the notion of an Anglo-American core collapsed amid the turmoil of the 1960s” and to have been eclipsed by multiculturalism, a late twentieth-century offshoot of cultural pluralism.<sup>22</sup> However, political scientist Samuel P. Huntington resurrected Anglo-conformity in 2004 when he warned that immigration from Latin America threatened to destroy the “core Anglo-Protestant culture” of the United States.<sup>23</sup>

Unlike Anglo-conformity, cultural pluralism valorizes cultural diversity, albeit of a limited sort. When philosopher Horace M. Kallen conceived of cultural pluralism in the early twentieth century, he sought to show the compatibility of “continental” (southern, central, and eastern European) immigrants with American democracy.<sup>24</sup> As a child, he emigrated with his family in 1887 from what is now Poland as part of the Great Wave: the arrival of some twenty million immigrants to the United States between 1880 and 1924.<sup>25</sup> During this period, immigrants hailing from southern, central, and eastern Europe were called “new” immigrants. As I discuss in chapter 3, some self-proclaimed “old stock” (Protestant, of northwestern European descent) Americans looked down on the “new” immigrants, doubted their ability to assimilate, and effectively blocked any more from immigrating via restrictive legislation, such as the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1924 (also known as the Johnson-Reed Act). Against a backdrop of growing xenophobia and anti-Semitism, cultural pluralism challenged biological racism and “the grey conformism of the melting-pot.”<sup>26</sup> All the while, it upheld “American civilization” as “the perfection of the cooperative harmonies of ‘European civilization.’”<sup>27</sup>

Its Eurocentrism notwithstanding, cultural pluralism posits that the United States is a “diverse and dynamic” host society and receiving country.<sup>28</sup> The United States not only shapes immigrants; it is also shaped by them. Cultural pluralism informs assimilation theory

in sociology, the academic discipline that has contributed the most to theorizations of assimilation, in at least two ways. First, cultural pluralism helped lay the groundwork for the ethnicity paradigm, “the mainstream of the modern sociology of race,” according to sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant.<sup>29</sup> Second, cultural pluralism is the foundation of “the pluralist perspective” on ethnicity.<sup>30</sup>

In theorizing assimilation, scholars have distinguished ethnicity from race. There are many definitions of ethnicity; among them are a basic group identity; real or fictive common ancestry; a means of mobilizing a certain population as an interest group; “a process of construction or invention which incorporates, adapts, and amplifies preexisting communal solidarities, cultural attributes, and historical memories”; and “a social boundary . . . embedded in a variety of social and cultural differences between groups.”<sup>31</sup> Since the second half of the twentieth century, definitions of ethnicity have emphasized the social and cultural.

Race, meanwhile, is understood as “a concept that signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests referring to different types of bodies.”<sup>32</sup> Put another way, race is a construct that merges the social and somatic. That said, things that do not necessarily have a clear or direct link to the physical or visual—for example, names, words, languages, and accents—may nonetheless come to be associated with race. The process whereby racial categories are produced and understood as part of a social hierarchy is known as racialization.

Where the assimilationist perspective maintains that ethnic differences dissolve in the melting pot that is the United States, the pluralist perspective holds that ethnicity endures, even if only in symbolic form (e.g., holidays).<sup>33</sup> In the assimilationist model, immigrants disappear into an Anglo-Protestant core. In the pluralist one, they find their place in a society of hyphenated Americans. Differences notwithstanding, both perspectives assume “a unilinear process”—however smooth or bumpy—“of integration into the host society.”<sup>34</sup> Whether that society is homogenous or heterogeneous, assimilation occurs. Those who do not assimilate are merely slow to do so, or they are anomalies, failures, or outsiders.

Scholars at the University of Chicago, chief among them Park, are widely credited with developing assimilation theory during the first half of the twentieth century. According to some early iterations of that theory (sometimes called the classical model of assimilation or assimilationism), assimilation is a linear and inexorable process.<sup>35</sup> Immigrants arrive and never look back. They change their names, learn English, acquire capital, and participate in mainstream institutions and culture. Within a couple of generations, their descendants blend in. For Park, assimilation was “a function of visibility.”<sup>36</sup> He observed that by the second generation, erstwhile white ethnics, like Polish-, Lithuanian-, and Norwegian-Americans, could not be distinguished from “the older American stock.” *Racial* minorities—namely Asians and blacks—continued to stand out. Irrespective of how long before their forebears had landed in the United States (or the United States had gone to their forebears), a “distinctive racial mark” prevented those groups from disappearing into the mainstream.<sup>37</sup>

For Park and other early scholars of assimilation, the twentieth-century city was the ideal milieu in which to study assimilation and relations among groups, immigrants and US-born African Americans alike.<sup>38</sup> In his first article on assimilation, “Racial Assimilation in Secondary Groups with Particular Reference to the Negro” (published in the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1914), Park approached race as a barrier to assimilation. By the 1980s, African Americans would by and large be bracketed out of theories of assimilation and cast as unassimilable.<sup>39</sup> Instead of viewing African Americans’ relationship to the mainstream through the lens of assimilation, scholars and policy makers have framed their status as outsiders-on-the-inside via such concepts as segregation, alienation, subpopulation, and underclass.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, assimilation qua absorption by the mainstream has been defined *against* race.<sup>41</sup>

Scholars in critical whiteness studies have approached whiteness as a racial formation, “the sociohistorical process by which racial identities are created, lived out, transformed, and destroyed.”<sup>42</sup> To make the shift from immigrant, to hyphenated American, to American plain



and simple, white ethnics (e.g., the Irish in the nineteenth century and Italian-Americans in the twentieth century) actively distanced themselves from African Americans and other groups branded “colored.”<sup>43</sup> “The struggles of white ethnics were not only with the groups above them, who were seeking to keep the newer arrivals in a subordinate position,” sociologists Richard Alba and Victor Nee remark, “but also with non-European groups, African Americans above all.”<sup>44</sup> In exchange for the status of (white) American, European immigrants and their ethnic offspring all but relinquished their ties to the Old World. The same did not hold true for non-European groups, even if they, too, gave up the languages, nationalities, names, dress, and religious beliefs and practices of their or their forebears’ homelands. Distinguishing ethnicity from race and drawing attention to the relationship of both to assimilation, Omi and Winant conclude that while “[b]eing ‘ethnic’ turns out to be about whether and how much an individual or group can assimilate into or hybridize with whiteness[,] [b]eing ‘racial’ is about how much difference there is between an individual or a group and their white counterparts.”<sup>45</sup> In a pluralist United States, ethnicity is the path to assimilation. In contrast, race—specifically, nonwhiteness—is an obstacle.

The failure of assimilation theory to account for the trajectories of people of color and “its implicit assumption that most immigrants and their descendants are anxious”—and here, I would add, able—“to shed their social and cultural heritage” prompted some scholars to claim that assimilation had “fallen into disrepute” during the last decades of the twentieth century.<sup>46</sup> Sociologist Nathan Glazer went so far as to ask if assimilation had died.<sup>47</sup> In fact, it never died, but it was reborn. As sociologist Moon-Kie Jung observes, “[I]n the mid-1980s, the long dominant assimilation paradigm . . . was theoretically reinvigorated. Through periodic challenges (e.g., pluralism, Marxism, transnationalism) and exaggerated reports of demise . . . assimilation theories adapted and remained the primary framework within, as well as against, which to analyze the lives of migrants and their offspring in the United States.”<sup>48</sup>

Jung identifies two theoretical frameworks that have revitalized assimilation theory: neoclassical assimilation and segmented assimilation. The former avoids some of the classical model's oversights by taking into account the non-European groups that have immigrated to the United States since the Immigration Act of 1965 removed the national origins quotas of the early twentieth century. Still, the neoclassical model continues to uphold assimilation as the "master trend" for immigrants and their descendants.<sup>49</sup>

Segmented assimilation complicates that trend by examining the multiple ways in which immigrants and their descendants adapt to a racially stratified society. After all, "how one assimilates into American society depends in large part on one's racial status," as sociologist Tanya Golash-Boza points out.<sup>50</sup> Using census data and case studies involving various immigrant groups, sociologists Alejandro Portes, Rubén G. Rumbaut, and Min Zhou argue that since immigrant groups and society itself are heterogeneous, there is no single mode of incorporation. While some immigrants and their offspring acculturate and integrate into the white middle class, others advance economically precisely by remaining in their immigrant communities. Still, others for whom "ethnicity [is] neither a matter of choice nor a source of progress but a mark of subordination . . . are at risk of joining the masses of the dispossessed."<sup>51</sup> Portes and Zhou conclude, "Children of nonwhite immigrants may not even have the opportunity of gaining access to middle-class white society, no matter how acculturated they become. Joining those native circles to which they do have access may prove a ticket to permanent subordination and disadvantage."<sup>52</sup>

Irrespective of the differences among the various theories and models of assimilation, the prediction made by Simons in 1901 has come to fruition. By the start of the twenty-first century, assimilation was declared "an indispensable concept" in "the social scientific study of immigration and intergroup relations" in the United States.<sup>53</sup> As a theory, it remains an organizing rubric in US ethnic and immigration