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Author(s): Clara W. Mayer

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CULTURE CONFLICTS AND RECENT INTELLECTUAL IMMIGRANTS

CLARA W. MAYER

The New School for Social Research

In the ultimate sense of education and of culture, there can be no conflicts. Education is the dynamic life process that makes us bearers and builders of culture; competent and independent contributors toward understanding life and carrying it forward on its various levels, physical, intellectual, and moral. When experimental physics turns up a fact in conflict with the body of physical doctrine, it is nothing more than a new and interesting problem, an area demanding more concentrated endeavor. Apparent culture conflicts are similar temporary stages on the way to a larger culture, a life with more content, individuals more capable of coping with it and enjoying it.

In this setting the recent immigration of intellectuals must be visualized. Because it is just over five years old, extremely young to be appraised for its social-spiritual effects, the following pages will be confined to the group that I have known best and worked with in almost daily contact since September 1933.

Any migration of importance is inspired by crucial events in the life of the individual, often of society or at least of a limited portion of it. The open eye of the traveler in a foreign country opens wider under the impact of a decisive break with the past and a relatively unknown future. The latter means rejuvenation, the former a new maturity. For the young intellectual beginning his career, no more stimulating opportunity could be given than in these United States at this time; it is like a breeze to a sail.

But let us think of the group of early and late middle age, and established reputation. Momentum had largely superseded struggle, distinction was assumed unless mediocrity was proved, talents were promoted and handicaps compensated by intimate knowledge

of milieu, by friendships, co-workers, and the material helps that position commands. In some respects, life was too easy. Then came the shock that culminated in migration. The immigrant was denuded of all nonessentials, and some essentials. In many respects, life began again, overwhelmingly, with a confusion of telescoped impressions held in suspense until they began to organize around the values and experiences with enough vitality to survive transplanting—purification, stimulation. A vastly wider horizon emerged from the youth and space of America as it replaced the age and congestion of Europe. At the same time, it became necessary to reconquer position, to compensate hospitality, and to justify election to a kinder destiny than had been vouchsafed to many in a similar predicament.

Immigrants who make the grade in these circumstances have undergone a double selective process in their countries of origin and of adoption. The first is no guarantee of the second, for early success often weakens resistance and dulls initiative. Indeed, one may say with Sir Arthur Salter that it is only the second effort in the lives of individuals or of nations that is proof of moral strength. America may well be making her second great effort along with her new immigrants for she is at the threshold of social and economic problems demanding that even wealth be husbanded, that there be a limit to waste, even of vast resources. "Opportunity was the watchword of 1925, security is the slogan of 1939." These are the words of an immigrant who was a visitor in 1925, and this is a change deriving added significance from the events that led to the recent immigration.

The war generation of the totalitarian countries, in particular the emigrants of that generation, have probably undergone very nearly a maximum of human experience in the allotted time—war, revolutions, left and right, with corresponding changes of government, inflation and deflation, emigration with all that it implies. They have learned, as few of us have had the opportunity, from

seeing theory put into practice. The generalized result has been rejection of dogma uncritically applied in practical politics, rejection of the revolutionary method and of underlying radical ideologies, especially of class antagonisms as the means to social betterment. Of the many claims that America may still advance toward being a promised land to the immigrant, probably none is more generally recognized even by erstwhile radicals than the absence of the ideology of the class struggle. It proved not only ineffectual but it contributed to the destruction of the very values it was designed to protect and advance. The revolutionary method was no less destructive, proving, if proof were necessary, that social disorder and violence, far from being the way to a better system, grow more dangerous with the same modern techniques, which rightly used would bring about evolutionary change. The further attempt to apply in politics the ready-made dogma of any creed, without considering in detail the concrete situation to which it is to apply, had its full disastrous tryout in the totalitarian countries. It converted ardent devotees of political "isms" into practical men who have learned, to their cost, that a particular situation demands its own solution, albeit with due regard to the ultimate goals of social justice.

Such is the new maturity, the significance of the second chance that proceeds on the heritage of a full experience. Positive and negative circumstances may help or hinder. Of the former, probably one of the most potent is membership in a group, called upon to continue its own profession of teaching for the sake not only of conserving individual talent but of salvaging what was best in the system of which it was a part and of which it might well be the sole survivor; imbued with a resulting sense of individual and collective responsibility, indeed of election; given the opportunity jointly to develop the assimilative process with the mutual help and criticism of the normal rather than the too friendly or unfriendly environment. For the effectiveness of the intellectual in-

dividually, his professional field is important according to the degree in which it varies from country to country, which again depends partly on the relative importance of theory and practice. The knowledge of concrete, practical detail, which is a matter of time and of intimate living with a community, can scarcely be reacquired; as an investment of capital it is largely lost in the new environment. On the other hand, a subject very abstractly handled can in general count less on the interest of an American public. Habitual use of a foreign language, which is a handicap to all, is a greater handicap to some from the standpoint of fluent subtle expression; embodying as it does the genius of the Anglo-Saxon people, which is particular and concrete, it acts as a corrective to German and Italian habits of mind tending toward the abstract and philosophical.

In analyzing the factors that make for the effectiveness of the intellectual immigrant or, for that matter, of any other immigrant, probably none is more important than the welcome given by the new community. In this instance it has been more than cordial; it was extended prior to arrival and has continued with uninterrupted warmth. Moreover, most of the differences in the academic setup here and abroad have been regarded by the newcomers as assets rather than drawbacks. With the college intermediate between the secondary school and graduate study, the doctor's degree here ceases to be the inevitable presupposition of all higher education as it is abroad, and graduate students are, generally speaking, more highly selected. Democracy as a way of life, deeper than any form of government, removes barriers between students and teachers, who are no longer authorities imparting authoritative and perhaps remote wisdom but who proceed rather on the basis of reasoning, prepared to give and take in informal discussion. All audiences, whether made up of students or of outside groups, are found to be independent, tolerant, interested—interested, to be sure, more in current events than in their historical explanation,

perhaps because history is not so obviously with us, in America, except in so far as it forms part of our habitual thinking as free men. This is American bedrock, formerly self-evident to the point of being unconscious or, as Vandervelde put it, taken for granted as air is taken for granted, equally indispensable. Children are the most direct route to the self-evident in a society; they have the unconscious quick responsiveness of youth—their response to these United States has been overwhelming, the call of youth to youth, the vanguard in the assimilative process of the family.

In casting up the balance, we have as positive assets experience that is invaluable, especially in the case of the intellectual immigrant who knows experience to be a part of his capital and who is accustomed to thinking of it critically rather than to take it for granted. We have the humanity and the purification that comes from losing one's pedestal and being again on one's own. We have the individual and the group sense of responsibility of those "saved for a purpose," superimposed upon a twofold moral selection. We have on the debit side the energy consumed in the struggle, including a capital of experience that is not transportable and varying from the negligible to the significant according to one's field of activity.

In a brilliant discussion by Dr. Hans Speier, entitled "Social Conditions of the Intellectual Exile,"¹ he remarks that the old universality of the mind has been thoroughly shaken in one respect. "There exists an international market for useful specialists, but parochial groups claim the supreme loyalties of the intellectual." This is the partial statement of a strange paradox. The specialist today is permitted an international market because his internationalism is incidental, not of the essence; but the universality, the internationalism of the intellectual, is the goal of culture, outlawed, therefore, in some parts of the world. Totalitarian governments have set out to patent their own brand of universality, which is a

¹ *Social Research*, IV, No. 3 (September 1937), pp. 316-328.

new and comprehensive provincialism, embracing logic, ethics, and law. Their aim is to extend the quarantine imposed on their own people by shouting so loudly and continuously that it may render futile the shouting of others, by printing more prolifically, and by spying more pervasively. The migration of the intellectual in this sense represents the defeat of the home government and a reassertion of the universality of culture, which would have been denied had he remained in Germany or in Italy. It is an assertion that the continuity of life depends more on culture than on soil, for culture was the primary issue in 1933. The battle has been joined around the world not in the struggle of culture versus culture in any sense in which culture has meaning, but in the struggle of culture versus the attempt to dictate and universalize a preferred brand of ignorance.

Gradually, but with accelerating speed, the United States is pooling the ideas and experiences of the world, not merely of former but likewise of present democracies. Gradually but certainly the conviction is growing that a principal crisis of civilization will be met and faced in the United States. Against the ultimate decision we need the intellectual and moral capital of mankind of which the intellectual immigrants of today are not a negligible portion.