

Book Review

The Making Of An American Community: A Case Study of Democracy in a Frontier County. By Merle Curti. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1969.

The paperback issue of this book is most welcome because it is one of the few sociological studies of life on the frontier. However, it contains no revisions, and consequently suffers from the same conceptual and methodological errors for classroom use in sociology which the earlier issue embodied. Dr. Curti attempts to prove Turner's theory (that the promotion of economic equality by frontier conditions led to political equality) and, hence, his over-concern for the economics of frontier life leaves much to be desired in another aspect of importance to the workings of democracy in Trempealeau County in northwest Wisconsin. He apparently felt satisfied with his discussion of assimilation and "Americanization" of immigrants in the county.

Assimilation is obviously important to any discussion of American democracy especially since the majority of the population at the end of the frontier period is composed of foreign-born residents and children of foreign-born residents. He certainly recognized its importance, and stated, "In our interpretation, while Americanization should be part of the democratic process, it is by its nature a development which takes time. And the fact that decade by decade the foreign-born . . . were increasingly represented in political and also in cultural activities, and that intermarriage increased, lends support to Turner's general position" (p. 444). Without present regard to Turner's theory, what does he show us about such increased representation?

He first shows (pp. 62-3) that the immigrants initially went only into agricultural occupations and later were increasingly represented in non-agricultural pursuits. But he also tells us that nativity groups tended to settle each in a particular area of the county. This naturally leads one to ask whether immigrants who became, say, businessmen were following examples of American businessmen or were imitating old world business practices. If their community was of their own ethnic group, then they would have little need to join, for example, American business associations; they would be equal members with Americans in an occupational group, but such a category would be statistical only; there would be no assimilation nor even an exchange of ideas. The flaw is that Dr. Curti doesn't tell us about the ethnic composition of the towns. (The only exception is Pigeon, "a little Norway," which will be discussed below.)

This error of course carries over to all other discussions of increased political, and cultural participation of immigrants. The sad part is that he had the information coded on his punch cards (Appendix I, p. 451). The reader will recognize that his "objective" data was supplied by the censuses of 1850, 1860, 1870, and 1880 which noted the township or village of occupation and place (including county) of birth.

The place of birth as his criterion for judging the ethnicity of groups brings us to what I would judge as another error which invalidates much of his data. It may serve well for most foreign-born residents (except Canadians), but it cannot serve as a basis for defining "Americans," which is after all the most important group since he compares all other groups against them in economic status and prosperity, political participation and literacy. "Americans" serve as the standard, as well as the group into which other groups are supposed to assimilate.

He, nowhere, explicitly defines "Americans" further than "U.S.-born" but in one place (p. 106) recognizes the consequences of this, when talking about the so-called trend toward intermarriages. In 1880, he states that "about one-half of the native-born Americans involved in these marriages were themselves children of immigrants" (p. 106). He thereby completely destroys the validity of his own statistics because the above immigrants would have been married about 1860 or before. By his own statistics for 1860 (p. 105), only 10 percent of married couples had the wife reporting a country of birth different from that of the husband. Thus, at least 45 percent of the people he is calling "Americans" are ethnically pure and only second generation "Americans." Americans were undefined enough at that time without his confusing us, in the present.

His indifference to defining Americans carefully is partly explained by the fact that the censuses recorded the birth places of the parents of all male county residents but not of female residents. However, he never uses data on females in nativity comparisons.

The solution to his methodological error would have been simple since he coded the respondents' parents' countries of birth on his punch cards (pp. 452-3). If he had just excluded those whose parents were both foreign-born, he would have a much higher probability that the remainder had been somewhat Americanized. Better yet, he could have coded the cards for the nativity of each parent and, instead of excluding people with foreign born parents, included them in the proper ethnic group when both parents were from the same country.¹ In other words, he should have used ethnicity rather than nativity as his criterion. It seems that few would have been excluded in this way. The fact that he didn't know the ethnicity of females only further invalidates his Table 11 (p. 105) on intermarriages of nativity groups as showing a trend toward greater assimilation of the foreign-born.

It seems to this reviewer that most European immigrants experienced a double migration, first to the east coast where they worked, often five or ten years, until they could afford the trip westward. During this time they could have had (by his definition) "American" children.

Unfortunately, Dr. Curti doesn't consider such a theory and further assumes that, if immigrants came from a poor country, they were poor.² "We would expect, on our interpretation of Turner's theory, that the foreign-born from 'poorer' countries, such as Ireland and Poland, would at first be found predominantly in the 'lower status' occupations but would rise. This trend would be part of the Americanization which Turner believed was promoted by the frontier" (p. 57). "If the Poles were poorer than other groups on very first arrival, as is quite possible, then they must have made quick and phenomenal progress to be able to make the reports they did in the 1870 census" (p. 443). However, besides ignoring any double migration theory, he also ignores his own statistics, namely: (1) the rate of turnover of the non-English speaking foreign-born was much higher than the native-born population (whose turnover rate was 70 percent in 1860 and 1870 (p. 68); (2) many "acquired farms with no idea of permanent settlement, but in order to realize on their value as the price of farm land went up" (p. 66); and (3) even farmers without improved land and agricultural laborers (both of which he defines as lower status occupations) had a surprisingly high percentage owning land (in 1860, 91 and 21 percent; in 1870, 56 and 23 percent respectively (p. 152). He fails to see the implications for Turner's theory if these conditions were to hold, generally, for large areas

of the frontier area. Such semi-nomadic, small-scale land speculators would not be "poorer than other groups on their first arrival" in the county.

Besides the above hypothesizing, Turner's theory on the raising of occupational status of immigrants with their Americanization can't be tested by this study because: (1) again, the lack of data on exclusiveness of communities and townships tells us nothing about actual Americanization, (2) the definition of "American" on a nativity basis doesn't allow us to know, for example, if Norwegian-American non-agricultural occupations were taken over by immigrant Norwegians. The statistics on changes to higher status agricultural occupations seem valid but Dr. Curti's surprise at the high amount of land of the lower status agriculturalists indicates that the differences in economic statuses of these groups were on the basis of value of the land and personal property and not so much on the amount of land.

This brings us to the main point of Turner's theory which is "that the ready accessibility of free or almost free land promoted economic equality and that this was followed by political equality" (p. 442). We have seen that increased non-agricultural occupational status of immigrants cannot be used to show increased economic equality of ethnic groups. We did find that the approximate amount of land owned was fairly close for all groups, but Dr. Curti shows³ that the distribution of total property for the county as a whole and for the various ethnic groups in it is very similar to older sections of the country in 1860 and 1870; the rich own a much greater percentage of the total property than their percentage in the total population nor in their particular ethnic group. He also found that the immigrants from non-English speaking countries were consistently inferior in the average value of total property to those born in English-speaking countries. Thus, there is neither economic equality between immigrant members of any one nativity group nor between nativity groups.

Yet he felt compelled only four chapters later to look again for economic equality. He formulated the question "if economic equality of differing groups is favored by a frontier environment [which he hadn't been able to show] just how would this be shown in the fortunes of these farm people who remained in the county ten years or more? In the first place, as pointed out earlier, "economic equality" of groups would not be achieved completely in ten years or twenty years. But for groups all starting out with equal or approximately equal acreage [in the first decade of settlement, 1860-1870] inequalities in other respects would over the years tend to lessen" (p. 197). He goes on to show that, indeed, there was a differential rate of gain for those staying the full period 1860 to 1870. "In the 1870's we should not expect to find the same kind and rate of "progress" as in the 1860's, because . . . the supply of government land year by year dwindled until for many settlers only the poorer land was available" (p. 205). He therefore seems to imply that economic equality of the ethnic groups was achieved in some other way [i.e., non-agricultural pursuits] in later years. By implying that, he shows us that this future equality is not a product of frontier conditions alone.

More importantly, since he tells us that the greatest influx of immigrants came in the late 1860's and early 1870's, he shows how the inequality of total property came about within each ethnic community. Non-agricultural pursuits became important to the late arrivals (p. 197). Moreover, since many newcomers arrived in the 1870's, they must have achieved economic equality in the implied

"other ways" [non-agricultural occupations] and not from the frontier conditions with their free land.

The thesis further states "that [economic equality] was followed by political equality." His superb account of the formation of Pigeon Township in 1875 should help a great deal in seeing whether this is a causal relationship, or not related at all. He poses the question "within their own community--and Pigeon was--in a very real sense, a 'little Norway' [no statistics on ethnicity again]--why did they not revert to a social and political pattern more like that of their homeland? In the first place, a greater equality among them here in private proprietorship in land may have promoted a greater social equality. . . . In the second place, the laws of Wisconsin were explicit: the town meeting had to meet; the town supervisors had to be elected in a certain manner, to bond themselves, and to perform prescribed services by the methods indicated. State laws on road accounts and school district finance were most precise and definitive. The more settled areas imposed American democracy on the polyglot frontier" (p. 297). Here he again stresses economic equality (in his "first place") but this time in relation to their homeland rather than other ethnic groups. The point seems poorly made, however, since the geography of Norway would severely limit the size of landholding; it would be much more appropriate for the Germans and Poles, who moreover traditionally attached great importance to the nearest town, if they were farmers.

This impression, that the first reason holds little weight, is reinforced by his description of early town meetings: "The turbulence which typified [the dominantly American parent township] town meetings were entirely absent from the Pigeon meetings. The supervisor's reports were accepted, apparently, with no questions asked. . . . Alternative leadership had begun to develop in Pigeon at the close of our period [1880, five years after the formation of the township]" (p. 318). Thus, one gets the distinct impression that the immigrant and immigrant communities developed the use of our democratic methods from being forced to accept their legal and ritual procedures and not because the immigrants felt socially equal to Americans.

One should certainly be wary of propounding an alternate theory to account for the apparently misconstrued data in this book, because of the few other frontier studies, and because of the methodological errors in the data, but we can perhaps overcome these handicaps by taking a fresh approach.

"Americanization" can be seen in: (1) change of language, (2) use of products and tools that are different than those of the native country, (3) change in customs, and (4) amount of intermarriage. There are perhaps others also, but the only one statistically dealt with in the book is intermarriage, which has importance to socialization of offspring. What seems obvious from Dr. Curti's table on intermarriage?

If we exclude the "Americans" from the 1880 census, we find the following percentage of intermarriage for the following nativity groups:

Irish:	13/200	= 6.5%
Germans:	38/842	= 4.2%
Norwegians:	22/2535	= 0.9%

The Irish spoke English and were thereby more easily assimilated; the Germans, however, included Poles born in Polish Germany. The thing that seems significant though, is that the smaller the ethnic group, the better is its chance of being assimilated quickly.

This seems reasonable since large numbers of one ethnic group are needed to create an ethnically exclusive community, which can supply its own services. On a superficial level, such communities would form just because friends and relatives who separated in the parent country and migrated at different times would desire to come together again for mutual aid. More importantly such communities come into existence because all recognize the old established social norms. Social interaction would give security rather than anxiety because most responses would be anticipated.

Some of the data can be better explained by trying to relate it to the size of immigrant groups. For example, from the conclusion: "all the immigrant groups did well, and certain groups traditionally considered very poor and under-privileged, especially the Irish and Poles, made an excellent economic adjustment." From the table presented on intermarriages (which actually represents all the married couples in the country) during the census year of 1880, we find that the Irish were a comparatively small ethnic group. Thus, they would have more easily been assimilated, learned laws, been more friendly with the established Americans, been able to get credit easier, and so on.

Another example from the conclusion: "In the census years 1850 and 1860, when definitely frontier conditions prevailed, we found that the foreign-born were represented in the ranks of labor in smaller percentages than we would have expected. As the country filled up and immigrants poured in [late 1860's and early 1870's], larger percentages were found. But at the same time, decade by decade, the percentages of foreign born in business and the professions increased." The success of the early foreign-born in 'higher' status occupations is more likely attributable to their small number relative to the Americans than to frontier conditions. In the later period, the foreign-born didn't learn skills or enjoy other benefits of Americanization but gradually took over non-agricultural occupations in their own communities.

It seems logical then, that frontiers are not particularly good places for large group assimilation because groups can segregate themselves too easily. In cities, immigrants could more easily associate with other ethnic groups just because there would be a higher level of social interaction than in frontier villages, and especially than on somewhat isolated farms.

Certainly, exclusive ethnic communities would, and did, exist in cities, but: (1) men would often be forced to work outside the ethnic community, (2) the opportunity to go outside the community easily would exist, and (3) schools promoting assimilation would already be established in the cities. Frontiers may have, historically, been the most important area for assimilation but they were not the easiest places to become assimilated.

One can perhaps forgive Professor Curti for his devotion to the Turner theory when one realizes that he is the Turner Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin. I recommend his book to the sociological reader, because it has

many good points. His discussion of the early political formation of counties and townships was very good, as was the connection he made between the political parties and assimilation

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Footnotes:

¹"Americans" would then be defined as children of both American-born, and one American and one foreign-born; if he didn't want to exclude anyone, then I would suggest that he include children of foreign born of different countries as Americans since most of them would probably be better "Americanized" than children of foreign-born of one country.

²The biographies of the two foreign-born minor leaders (p. 427) show that one worked fifteen years in Massachusetts, the other worked six years in LaCrosse and bought 160 acres when he first arrived in Trempealeau County.

³He could not discuss the property structure in 1880 because the census for that year didn't note the value of property (pp. 77-83).