

Carlsbad 1819

Like another Chouannerie

Hyphenated Americanism and the sense of place

August 26, 2018 by Nulle Terre Sans Seigneur

One common complication of applying the identitarian maxim of “become who we are” in the American case, is how to deal with the phenomenon described by Theodore Roosevelt as “hyphenated Americans.” Ought total submission to an American nationality be demanded or can vestiges of Old World roots safely be preserved?

Count Joseph Alexander Huebner, an Austrian envoy to Milan, ambassador to the Holy See, among many other positions served, had in his ramble 'round the world of 1871 plenty of pertinent observations to make about the relative assimilation of the various ethnicities inhabiting the West and East Coast. Stepping off from the Sherman House in Chicago at night, the German emigrants are described like so:

Night falls, and the streets are beginning to be empty. Everywhere I hear the German tongue, and strive to enter into conversation with some of my fellow-countrymen. Not till after they have looked at me with anxious rather than curious eyes will German frankness overcome Anglo-American reserve. But then they unbend and answer my questions gladly. Ah ! with what enthusiasm they speak of the late war ! National pride and the excitement of victory light up these honest middle-class faces. The wonderful success of their brethren beyond the seas has come to them in the light of a revelation. It has raised their moral tone, revived their energy, and given birth to new aspirations in their hearts, which, in the American sense, would be incompatible with the constitution of the United States. Until now, of all the emigrants, the Germans were those who mingled the most steadily and quickly, and were almost fused in fact, with the Anglo-Saxon race, which forms the basis of the population of the Eastern States. I was very much struck by this, last year, when I was going to Niagara. Everywhere my emigrant fellow-countrymen of the last ten or twelve years, if they still talked German to their children, were answered by them in English. One sees that the third generation, with the exception of some of the customs of the Fatherland, such as the taste for music and for beer, is completely Americanised.

This was the case everywhere except in Pennsylvania, where the Germans form so large a portion of the community, and have in consequence preserved the traditions, the habits, and, though very imperfectly, the language of their mother-country. To-day, however, under the impulse of a sudden, violent, and perhaps lasting reaction the German element has emerged from its state of passive resignation. They have become proud of their nationality. They reckon upon preserving and cultivating it. They are like people who, suddenly having discovered their own value, are naturally disposed to exaggerate its importance, to become difficult to live with, and to quarrel with their friends. This is the danger which is apprehended in the official circles of Washington. This again is what is foreseen at New York, where I even heard it asserted that the Germans had the intention of forming a distinct element and constituting themselves into a separate political body in the heart of the American confederation.

Almost American, but sometimes the kraut within emerges with a patriotic vengeance — such as to celebrate the outcome of the Franco-Prussian War, as described above. Alright, so Ben Franklin may have had a point, but wait! —

All day long the husband is at his office, or in his counting-house. He only comes in at meal-times and devours his food with the silence and expedition of a starving man. Then he rushes back to his treadmill. If there are any children, they go to school when they are five or six years old, by themselves, both going and coming, and pass the rest of their days exactly as they please, no one thinking it right to interfere with their liberty. Paternal authority is nil, or at any rate, is never exercised. As for education, in our sense of the word, they have none ; but instruction, and that a public one, is good and accessible to all. These little gentlemen talk loud, and are as proud and sharp as the full-grown men of their nation ; the young girls at eight and nine years old excel in the arts of coquetry and flirtation, and promise to become “fast” young ladies. But nevertheless they make good and faithful wives. If their husband should be rich, they will help him to ruin himself by excessive extravagance in dress ; but they will accept misery with equal calmness and resignation, and fly into the same follies as of old the moment there is a change in the wheel of fortune.

Coquetry, flirtation, the vacant patriarch — now we’re getting somewhere.

Other highlights are the venting of an Illinois farmer that “the republic has had its day, what we want now is a dictatorship. There are only two classes of men in the States : those who pay, and those who are paid — the tax-payers and the government functionaries. The first hate and despise the second.

Everything is going to the devil, and a military dictatorship is the only thing which can put things straight." Upon which objections are voiced that as long as America has vast uncultivated tracts of land, the republic can stay, but when overpopulation kicks in, then military dictatorship is a possible avenue.

Huebner also dubs (<https://archive.org/stream/arambleroundwor00hbgoog#page/n184/mode/2up/>), the style of architecture in which the wealthy bankers and merchants of San Francisco live in, as "American Renaissance."

"The past! Why, there is none! That is the secret of Californian life," adding that "money is always at hand for everything," and so in the end "it comes to the same thing ; for everyone has credit. They do not, therefore, draw back before any question of expense. On the contrary, they take advantage of every new invention which has sprung out of the speculative heads of the Old World or of the States. They appropriate them at once, and introduce them on the largest scale."

With all this restless truck, barter and exchange, one will wonder who has time to stop for social belonging and national cohesion. At one point, Huebner states quite bluntly (<https://archive.org/stream/arambleroundwor00hbgoog#page/n244/mode/2up/>):

To become American would presuppose the entire destruction of Europe.

The promise of American emigration, according to him, are the procurement of bread, liberty and equality. It is not always as advertised, as the German republican emigres are disappointed by all the graft, and other European democrats by the wealth disparities. "Contrary to Europe, your country is a sheet of white paper. Everything has to be begun; everything is new."

Huebner lays great emphasis on the country revolving around the idea (<https://archive.org/stream/arambleroundwor00hbgoog#page/n96/mode/2up/>) of "illimitable space." The benefits are that (supposedly) various quarrels and arguments in terms of politics are reduced from existential threats to fashion statements — if the East isn't earning you enough bread, go North or West. At the same time this means that "vital questions do not exist for individuals," i.e. there are no first principles.

Hence the German emigres' widely divergent and shifting approach to their ethnic identity — whether to be Americanized and ditch their Deutschthum, or to bask in it with pompous displays of ethnic cuisine, of readings of Goethe and Schiller, etc. But as previously stated, "to become American would presuppose the entire destruction of Europe," so in the interests of having a self-conscious ethnic heritage, one is pulled into prefixing the hyphens.

This isn't particularly relevant anymore now that deracination is nearly unanimous, but any proposal for an Amerikaner nationalism has to grapple with it.

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