



REVIEW

Josef Jařab (ed.): *Horace M. Kallen a vývoj americké kulturní identity* [Horace M. Kallen and the Development of American Cultural Identity]. Olomouc: Periplum, 2011, ISBN 978-80-86624-61-7, 147 pp.

The metaphor of the United States as the melting pot of nations is rather well-known and frequently used (Sollors 1986: 66, Glazer 1997: 101). The tiny volume of essays named *Horace M. Kallen a vývoj americké kulturní identity* [Horace M. Kallen and the Development of American Cultural Identity] and edited by the renowned Olomouc scholar Josef Jařab presents to Czech and Slovak readers a concept that challenged the melting pot theory – the concept of cultural pluralism. The volume consists of Czech translations of two essays which defined cultural pluralism in the second decade of the twentieth century – Horace M. Kallen’s “Democracy versus the Melting Pot” and Randolph S. Bourne’s “Trans-National America” and two essays written by contemporary Czech scholars, Josef Jařab and Michaela Weiss, which assess the concept from today’s viewpoint.

In “Democracy Versus the Melting Pot”, which forms the first chapter of the book, Kallen, a young Jewish intellectual, proposed the theory of cultural pluralism. The essay was first published in *The Nation* magazine in 1915. Kallen here challenges supporters of Americanization and the melting pot concept by citing various accomplishments of immigrant groups. Probably the most famous idea of Kallen’s essay is the metaphor of symphony of civilizations, which he contrasts with the melting pot. As every orchestra has its instruments with distinctive tones and melodies so “in society each ethnic group is the natural instrument, its spirit and culture are its theme and melody, and the harmony and dissonances and discords of them all make the symphony of civilization” (43).

The second essay of the volume, “Trans-National America”, was written by another young intellectual, Randolph S. Bourne, and originally published in *Atlantic Monthly* in 1916. Bourne was the first one to expand Kallen’s cultural pluralism thesis. An interesting fact is that Kallen and Bourne both noticed that the most backward part of the US was the one which had resisted large-scale immigration from Europe, the region that lacked the diversity of the Northeast or Midwest – the South. Kallen calls the white people of the South “often degenerate and backward” (16), while Bourne asks those who feel that non Anglo-Saxons are inferior whether they want “the foreign hordes Americanized into such an Americanization” as is common in the South and considers this region to be “culturally sterile because it has had no advantage of cross-fertilization like the Northern states” (51).

The volume’s lengthiest essay was written by Michaela Weiss. “Kulturní pluralismus vs. tavící kotel: počátky hledání americké (židovské) identity” [Cultural pluralism vs. the melting pot: the beginnings of the search for American (Jewish) identity] opens by tracing Jewish immigration to America from the seventeenth century, when the first Sephardic Jews arrived. It then takes the reader through Jewish immigration from Germany initiated in 1840s to mass immigration of Jews from Eastern European countries taking place at the turn of the century. The author also discusses

important figures of Reform Judaism in America such as the Czech-born Isaac Mayer Wise. In a subchapter named “Sionismus a hebraizmus” [Sionism and Hebraism] Weiss mentions Mordecai Manuel Noah, one of the most influential American Jews of the era, who in 1825 declared a Jewish refuge at Grand Island, New York, which he named Ararat. However, he had virtually no support from the Jewish community and his idea was refused. Despite his unsuccessful attempt, Noah is considered to be a forerunner of modern Zionism. Michaela Weiss also notices the influential Mathew Arnold’s essay “Hebraism and Hellenism”, which played an important role in shaping the thinking about American Jewish identity (Arnold 2004[1869]: 191–192).

Arnold’s essay influenced Horace Kallen, who himself contributed to the search for American Jewish identity. Weiss correctly points out that he did not base his theory of identity on religious grounds, but on cultural and ethnic diversity and opposed Jewish assimilation. He became a supporter of Hebraism. The term would deserve at least a brief definition in a footnote, since it can be unknown to readers who are not well versed in Jewish studies.

In the second part of her well-researched essay Michaela Weiss discusses literary treatment of Jewish identity. Among the authors she mentions are supporters of Jewish assimilation such as Abraham Cahan, the author of *The Rise of David Levinsky*, Edward Steiner (native of Senica, Slovakia; author of *From Alien to Citizen: The Story of My Life in America*) or Mary Antin (*The Promised Land*). Weiss notes that particularly Mary Antin was criticized by several scholars including Kallen for her open support of assimilation. Nonetheless, the largest attention is paid to the coinage of the term “melting pot”. The British-Jewish writer Israel Zangwill wrote his play *The Melting Pot* in 1908 and the expression has been in use ever since. Despite being scorned by critics, his play became very popular with American audiences. The goal of all these writers, according to Weiss, was “to show Jews not as some hostile foreign force but as Americans” (92). Michaela Weiss’ essay offers a broad overview of the development of Jewish identity in America and widens the scope of Horace M. Kallen’s influential essay.

The final chapter of the book, written by Josef Jařab, is titled “Mezi tavicím kotlem, kulturním pluralizmem a multikulturalizmem” [Between the melting pot, cultural pluralism and multiculturalism]. It puts both Kallen’s and Bourne’s essays to a wider historical context and offers a comprehensive commentary of them. While Weiss in her essay focuses mostly on Jewish identity, Josef Jařab among other ideas discusses the identity of African-Americans. He notices that Kallen “did not have in his pluralist orchestra or pluralist federation of nations reserved any place either for black American or for indigenous people, i.e. Indians” (134). He finds Kallen’s ignorance of African-Americans especially puzzling, since Kallen wrote his text in the period of emerging Harlem Renaissance, the era of blossoming of African-American culture. Jařab also observes that Civil Rights Movement changed the character of American society which eventually became openly pluralist. After 1960s cultural pluralism has transformed into multiculturalism. Jařab sees the difference between the two concepts in the fact that the latter “is an effort to correct earlier neglect, discrimination or persecution of certain groups of population” (144).

In the past few decades, academic interest in Horace Kallen has been somehow diminished. Besides a collection of essays *The Legacy of Horace M. Kallen* (1987) and a new edition of his *Culture and Democracy in the United States* (1998) no book-length study was published on the founder of the concept of cultural pluralism. As far as Czech Republic or Slovakia are concerned, *Horace M. Kallen a vývoj americké kulturní identity* is the first publication of its kind that has been published in either country. Czech and Slovak readers and scholars devoted to the 20th century American history, literature or Jewish studies will therefore appreciate the twofold merit of the book. Firstly, it brings a Czech translation of two important essays by two influential American intellectuals and opponents of the melting pot theory which have not been translated before (and Michaela Weiss’ translation deserves nothing but praise). Secondly, it contributes to the discourse on American cultural identity and Horace M. Kallen by bringing an illuminating insight and a broad and informed commentary of the historical background of the theory of cultural pluralism. The benefit of Michaela Weiss’ essay rests in a comprehensive literary analysis of numerous works of early twentieth century Jewish-American authors which brings fresh light to the discussion of Jewish identity in the United States.

On the other hand, Josef Jařab's contribution lies in applying the concept of cultural pluralism to African-Americans, a minority group which was altogether neglected by Horace Kallen.

References

- Arnold, Matthew (2004[1869]) "Hebraismus and helénismus". Transl. by Michaela Náhliková. *Aluze* 1: 187–193.
- Glazer, Nathan (1997) *We Are All Multiculturalists Now*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Kallen, Horace (1998) *Culture and Democracy in the United States*. New Brunswick: Transaction.
- Konvitz, Milton (ed.) (1987) *The Legacy of Horace M. Kallen*. New York: Herzl Press.
- Sollors, Werner (1986) *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Jozef Pecina

Address: Jozef Pecina, Department of English and American Studies, Philosophical Faculty, University of Saints Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, nám. J. Herdu 2, 917 01 Trnava, Slovakia. [email: jozef.pecina@ucm.sk]