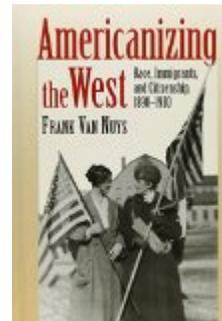


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Frank Van Nuys. *Americanizing the West: Race, Immigrants, and Citizenship, 1890-1930*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002. xvi + 294 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1206-2.

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In *Americanizing the West*, Frank Van Nuys examines how issues of race, ethnicity, economic rights and wrongs, social control, immigration, and the myriad other concerns of the Progressive Era collided or coluded with the evolving Myth of the American West. Van Nuys, an assistant professor of history at the South Dakota School of Mines and Technology, does multiple duty with his book, exploring Progressive Era reform and the modernizing West, and how fear of aliens and alien ideas unleashed with the coming of World War I changed the course of both. These subjects have been treated individually before, but Van Nuys successfully demonstrates that they were related.[1] His links are the social, political, and cultural roots and branches of early-twentieth-century reform, especially the efforts to “Americanize” adult immigrants through education in American history, politics, and ideology as well as the English language.

Many of us who are veterans of U.S. history surveys, either as teachers or as students, will recall that the Progressives’ urgent desire to prepare the foreign-born for swifter assimilation arose as the native-born “old stock” Americans responded to a rising tide of “new” immigrants flowing from southern and eastern Europe (usually into Ellis Island). Americanization, we further recall, was related to the settlement house movement spearheaded by such noted middle-class reformers as Jane Addams, and so we consider these efforts as being relevant mostly to the history of the Northeast, and perhaps the Midwest, since Addams was a Chicagoan.[2] Yet Westerners also participated in the movement, since a great many “new” immigrants either bypassed overcrowded ethnic enclaves in the urban East and Midwest or, at least, did not linger in them very long before following the

well-trodden westward paths laid down by the pioneer forbears of “old stock” American Westerners.

As Van Nuys shows, Americanization in the West was not a pale imitation of the eastern variety, since Westerners experienced a cultural situation very different from the East or even Midwest, and sought to preserve their distinctive sense of history. For example, many Westerners, especially those descended from early pioneers, romanticized the frontier experience and so considered themselves to be made of a hardier American stock, purer even than that of “old stock” Americans whose forebears had remained in the dissolute East. The nineteenth-century frontier myth of the rugged individualist (or, alternatively, the pioneer family) struggling against and ultimately prevailing over harsh elemental landscapes maintained its powerful grip on Westerners’ identity as the West began to modernize, urbanize, and industrialize in the twentieth century, that is, just as the heretofore distinctive region was itself undergoing assimilation and “Americanization” (p. 3).

Moreover, unlike their counterparts in the East, the Western Americanizers grappled with the presence in their midst of Indians, Hispanics, and Asians. At least some of these people were not recent immigrants, of course, and some of their ancestors (especially of the Indians) actually had beaten the white pioneers to the “American” West. Faced with a well-established multiplicity of races, ethnicities, and cultures, white Westerners perceived the region as a geographic and “racial frontier,” a place where Anglo-American civilization struggled for mastery over the unassimilable alien culture. This racialized image of the West shaped Anglos’ responses to old and new immigrants during the

late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Indeed, the Westerner-inspired Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Japanese-American Gentleman's Agreement of 1907-1908, and hostility to the Mexican-descended predated the Progressive Era alarm over "new immigrants" from southern and eastern Europe (pp. 18-19).

Although many people were excluded from the assimilation efforts by the rhetoric of the racial frontier, Western Americanizers had great faith that education and other organized forms of social control could transform other immigrants into productive citizens. Among Van Nuys's recurring cast of characters is a remarkable woman, Dr. Grace Raymond Hebard, whose public service credentials included a Ph.D. from Illinois Wesleyan University, admission to the Wyoming bar, authorship of monographs and textbooks, the directorship of the University of Wyoming's political economy department, and even a term on the University's board of trustees. Dr. Hebard was a tireless proselytizer of the Western pioneer myth and American exceptionalism. Her prowess as an Americanizer brought her national renown, especially in the years during and just after World War I, when many Americanizers sought not just to assimilate immigrants to American social norms, but to fashion them into loyal Americans free of alien radicalism (pp. 140-143).

Van Nuys devotes a great deal of this book to the impact the war and the subsequent rise of fear of radicalism, whether union agitation or revolutionary rhetoric, had on Americanization efforts in the West. He gives us a vivid picture of hundreds of educators, employers, and, finally, government bureaucrats who participated in the movement by sponsoring and later attempting to mandate programs aimed at Americanizing adult immigrants. Van Nuys shows how these attempts generally failed to transform immigrants into loyal, productive citizens, but contributed greatly to the modernization, bureaucratizing, and ultimately, integration of the West—surely the antithesis of the cherished frontier myth (pp. 194-195).

The movement was spent by the end of the twenties and the coming of the Great Depression. Yet as Van Nuys shows in an epilogue, the urge to "Americanize" the di-

verse population never really became extinct. Efforts to require an "English-only" public discourse and to set national standards for history instruction are examples of the continuing attractiveness of the idea that there is a finite set of ideas and ideals that make America exceptional, and that these ought to form the foundation of citizenship (pp. 201-202).

As many readers of H-West will recognize, this review comes along after an extended online dialogue on the state of Western history, initially begun as questions were raised and opinions were expressed on the success or failure of the recently concluded annual meeting of the Western History Association. That often provocative discussion revealed pervasive dissatisfaction that "western historians" either leave too many alternative perspectives from their accounts, or fail to take the dissenting voices seriously enough. To those who contributed to or at least followed the thread, and especially to those who missed it, this timely book will prove to be of interest on a number of levels.

And as the recent online discussion showed, the resistance to the Americanizing project—still seen by many as the silencing of disparate and often dissenting voices—is also alive and well. For what it teaches about earlier conflicts over these enduring issues, *Americanizing the West* deserves attention.

Notes

[1]. See John F. McClymer, "The Americanization Movement and the Education of the Foreign-Born Adult," in *American Education and the European Immigrant, 1840-1940*, ed. Bernard J. Weiss (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), pp. 96-116; and James R. Barrett, "Americanization from the Bottom Up: Immigration and the Remaking of the Working Class in the United States, 1880-1930," *Journal of American History* 79 (December 1992): pp. 996-1020.

[2]. Note that both developments were elements in the Progressives' "search for order" in an increasingly complex American society and culture. See Robert H. Wiebe, *Search for Order, 1877-1920* (Hill & Wang, 1980).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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