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The United States as a Microcosm: Horace Kallen and the Theory of Cultural Pluralism

The question of cultural identity has been without doubt one of the topics that profoundly marked American history. The United States, which can be considered par excellence a multiethnic society, has regularly defined itself as a nation of immigrants. According to Donna Gabaccia, “the immigrant paradigm of American History provides a familiar example. This historical interpretation defines the United States as a nation of immigrants, in which incorporation of foreigners symbolizes the promise and accomplishments of American democracy” (Gabaccia 1115). From the first English colonists to the African slaves, from the Scandinavians, Germans and Irish to those coming from Eastern and Southern Europe, from the Asian to the American-Hispanic masses, many destinies have crossed and mixed in what many have described as a land of almost unlimited opportunities. Inevitably, therefore, the United States examined the question of its cultural identity from its origin, and the debate and elaboration of theories on these themes has never stopped occupying the considerations of public figures, intellectuals, or private citizens. Furthermore, these considerations reached a widespread and a more in-depth elaboration in those periods of American history in which the migration fluxes were greater, as were the consequences on the social equilibrium.

The early twentieth century was one of these periods. In this context Horace Meyer Kallen (1882-1974), a philosopher of Jewish origin who became an influential liberal intellectual, elaborated his well-known theory of cultural pluralism, which anticipated the more recent multicultural theories, and which still today provokes wide interest.¹ Between 1900 and 1915 the currents of thought regarding the identity question in America could be divided into two large categories: the anti-immigration movements, often characterized by openly racist tendencies, were challenging the assimilationist thought of the melting-pot theorists. The latter believed that American identity should result from the fusion and integration of the diverse ethnic groups that made up the social fabric of the country, and saw therefore in

the United States a place in which the different Old World ethnic identities disappeared to form a new nationality. It is however necessary to make a further distinction between those who supported a *tout-court* assimilationism, for which each single ethnic group would have to offer its own particular contribution to the development of a new national identity, and the supporters of Americanization, who, for the majority, believed that the new immigrants should integrate into the American society adapting themselves to the typically WASP principles and values of the country. With respect to these two different currents of social thought, Kallen's theory of cultural pluralism represented a 'third way' through which he tried to affirm the positive value of ethnic differences.

Principally, two public debates stimulated Kallen's reflection: the first, and from a genealogical point of view the most important, was the one within American Hebraism between the integrated and pro-assimilationist elite of the German-Jewish community and the Zionists, whose ideology was more popular among the Jews coming from Eastern Europe. The second was the one on American identity that grew at a national level and that saw a confrontation, from a plurality of different positions, between assimilationists, supporters of Americanization, melting-pot theorists, cosmopolitans, and racists. Starting with Kallen's thoughts on Zionism and the Jewish identity and ending with his contributions on the international order the day after the end of the First World War, a genealogical approach to the elaboration of the theory of cultural pluralism will show how this theory was not conceived only as an answer to the racist and assimilationist tendencies that dominated the American scene in the 1910s, but rather how it resulted from a reflection placed on three distinct levels: that of Kallen's Zionist conception of the Jewish identity, that of the broader identity question in the United States, and that of the international order.

It was mainly the condition of the Jews within the country that stimulated Kallen's understanding of the role of ethnic minorities in the United States. At that time no other ethnic group living on American soil seemed to suffer the same erosion of identity. The massive migration from the villages and ghettos of Eastern Europe had thrown thousands of immigrants into a country whose cultural traditions and habits were different. At the same time, the Jewish community was divided. On one side there were the Jews of German

origin, most of whom had arrived in the United States from the end of the 1830s and were integrated into the social pattern of their new country, while on the other side there were the Jews of more recent immigration, chiefly coming from Eastern Europe and of humble economic conditions. As Arthur Hertzberg has suggested, "what the 'German Jews' found harder to face was the question of the foreignness of the newly arriving Jewish masses. Here the Jewish situation was unique. All of the other ethnic groups which had come to the United States in large numbers after the middle of the nineteenth century did not find well-established predecessors who were expected to take responsibility for the newcomers" (Hertzberg 179). The Jewish situation was different: since Gentiles were considering Jews of all origins as belonging to a single and cohesive community, "the 'German Jews' were ... trapped: they were inevitably involved with the 'Russian Jews', but they wanted to keep their distance" (Hertzberg 180).

A further division based on religious beliefs was added: the Jews of German origin mainly adhered to Reform Judaism, while those coming from Eastern Europe were above all Orthodox. Reform Judaism was born in nineteenth-century Germany. During the period of the French Revolution, many Jewish intellectuals who dreamed of emancipation accepted the optimistic teachings of the Enlightenment, turning their backs on what they considered the outdated Judaism of the ghetto. According to Naomi Cohen, "understanding that the modern state would not tolerate separatism of a nationalist nature within its borders, they defined themselves solely as a religious group" (Cohen 40). The national aspects of the Jewish identity were explicitly repudiated. In considering the Jews simply as a religious community, Reform Judaism assigned them a universal mission, the aim of which was to spread around the world the religion preached by the Prophets: the Jews were not in exile, but had been chosen to spread the knowledge and worship of God; the Diaspora therefore was not to be considered a kind of divine punishment but a mission. This universalism, the insistence on the idea of mission and the open renunciation of the hope of returning to Palestine represented the central traits of the theology of Reform Judaism. The clash with the Zionist movement, who exercised stronger attraction on the new immigrants, was therefore inevitable. The Russian, Lithuanian and Polish Jews, who had arrived on American soil by the thousands and who

formed the ranks of American Zionism, were mainly bringing with them a traditional conception of Judaism. Furthermore, the same American Zionist movement operated to revive the group consciousness of the Jews in an anti-assimilationist direction: as John Higham has noticed, “in calling for the rebirth of a Jewish nation, Zionism affirmed a commonality of all Jews transcending religious, social, and political differences. In America it made its strongest appeal as an antidote to assimilation” (Higham 205).

But apart from being played on the theoretical level of identity conceptions, the conflict between these ‘two souls’ of Hebraism in the United States became a true struggle for power. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the Jews of German origin dominated the American Jewish establishment, above all thanks to their economic and social success. The arrival into the country of thousands of Jews from Eastern Europe (more than two million between 1880 and 1920) was therefore a source of deep concern for them, because it threatened, at the roots, the balance of power that had been established. For that reason, in 1906 the leadership of German Hebraism, among which were the most influential and powerful American Jews, founded the American Jewish Committee. As has been pointed out by Melvin Urofsky, this organization represented the conservative perspective and the aristocratic tendency of the group, which intended to set up a body able to control the ever-growing Jewish community and to give it representation in the face of the political institutions of the country (Urofsky 75-78). It is not a coincidence that, from about 1905 onward, it was the American Zionist movement that began contesting the leadership of the Jewish community of the country to the American Jewish Committee through an extensive political campaign which had as its purpose the creation of the American Jewish Congress, an organization which should have given representation to American Jews on purely democratic bases (Urofsky 164-194).

The purpose of this brief historical review is to show how Kallen’s polemics against Reform Judaism, which was expressed in several articles published during the first years of his commitment within the American Zionist movement and later re-edited in *Judaism at Bay*, was part of a wider conflict between separate factions of American Hebraism.² By adhering to Zionism, Kallen had developed an articulated criticism towards the German leadership of the Jewish American community and their assimilationist

tendencies. In this context, he made his opposition to the vision of the Jewish people professed by Reform theology one of the main points of his conceptual elaboration previous to the formulation of the theory of cultural pluralism. And it was in the sphere of this criticism that these ideas on ethnicity grew and developed, later converging in his writings on the American identity.

As a demonstration of this fact, particularly relevant is the argument set forth by Kallen in the 1910 article "Judaism, Hebraism and Zionism." In it he elaborated exactly that distinctive idea of ethnic groups and of their role in the concert of civilization which a few years later would have characterized the more consummated formulations of the theory of cultural pluralism. Essentially Kallen thought that ethnic groups had the right to preserve their own distinctive traits only if they could demonstrate that they were able to contribute to the growth and enrichment of mankind:

to demonstrate their ethical right to be is to demonstrate that 'the Jewish problem' is incidental and unnecessary, that the real effect of the Jews is a positive and constructive effect, that by remaining their living selves, by perfecting their natural and distinctive group functions they must contribute to the welfare of nations and serve international comity. (37)

The necessary conditions consisted in having a political unity behind them, a mother-country that was able to act as the center of irradiation of their cultural heritage. History, according to Kallen, proved the legitimacy of the national vindications of the Jewish people: the Jews in a remote past had had a mother-country which through the centuries had enabled the survival of a strong cultural tradition. For this reason only the refusal of the assimilation advocated by Reform Judaism and the endorsement of the Zionist option could be a feasible way to ensure a future to the Jews of the entire world. Furthermore, Kallen was already using almost the same concepts and the same terminology that he would apply to his more consummated formulations of the theory of cultural pluralism. In particular, he used the same 'musical' metaphor of the symphony and harmony of civilization which would have been one of the stronger symbolic features of the 1915 article "Democracy Versus the Melting-Pot." "Zionism is the solution of the Jewish problem," wrote Kallen in 1910, "because, if the past is any warrant for the future, there is every reason to believe that with the Jews as a free people in

Palestine or elsewhere, that unique note which is designated in Hebraism has a chance to assume a more sustained, a clearer and truer tone in the concert of human cultures, and may genuinely enrich the harmony of civilization" (41).

It is therefore evident how Kallen elaborated a strong anti-assimilationist disposition precisely in the context of his commitment to Zionism and of the conflict with the leaders of American Hebraism of German origin, who were adherents of Reform Judaism. The intrinsically positive value of cultural differences and the necessity for their perfection and preservation were in essence the assumptions on which Kallen based the legitimation of the demands made by the Zionist movement. The democratic and pluralistic nationalism that characterized his writings on Zionism and on the Jewish identity provided the conceptual foundations on which he subsequently developed his idea of multiethnic America as an answer to the racist and the assimilationist tendencies of the period. This fact has already been stressed by Higham in *Send These to Me* and, above all, by Milton Konvitz, in an essay, in which he argued: "all the essential ingredients of what has come to be known as cultural pluralism were articulated by Horace Kallen in his attempt to define Hebraism and Zionism ... It is not true, as has been asserted, that Kallen saw Zionism through his vision of America. The order, by his own published testimony, was just the reverse: he saw America through his vision of Zionism" (Konvitz 30-31). Recently Daniel Greene, who in "A Chosen People in a Pluralist Nation" gave particular attention to Kallen's writings on Hebraism published in the early 1910s, also underlined how it was exactly in the attempt to answer the open question of Jewish identity that he developed the theory of cultural pluralism.

After this first partial enunciation, Kallen defined in a more complete manner his theory of cultural pluralism in the article "Democracy Versus the Melting-Pot," published in the *Nation* in February 1915. The main reasons that pushed him to voice his ideas on the identity question in a wider national context were the popularity reached by the assimilationist tendencies and the growth of studies and publications on American identity and on immigration coming from the intellectual and academic circles of the country. Assimilationism had received further resonance by the appearance of Israel Zangwill's play *The Melting-Pot*, first staged in 1908. A British Jew and a writer, in 1905 Zangwill had left the Zionist movement to create the

Jewish Territorialist Organization, a movement that “was willing to accept any suitable land outside Palestine for Jewish settlement” (Cohen 15). In his well-known play, overtly appreciated also by Theodore Roosevelt, he described the story of a Russian-Jewish immigrant family escaping from the pogroms and looking forward to a land free of ethnic divisions (Gerstle 50-51). According to Werner Sollors, “the concept of the melting pot that emerged from Zangwill was a centrist one. It provided an imaginative, though immensely pliable, middle ground between ethnic believers in the immutability of descent, radical culture critics, and American opponents of immigration, all of whom it drew into the newly popularized melting imagery, even if they seemed to resent it” (Sollors 74). However, it was *The Old World in the New* by Edward Ross that mostly irritated Kallen’s sensibility: Ross, a sociologist from the University of Wisconsin known for his progressive political tendencies, in this work gave expression to racist convictions directed against the new immigrants.

Analyzing the situation in which the United States found itself during this period, Kallen observed how the government theory, on which the democratic principles expressed in the Declaration of Independence were based, was put to the test by ethnic inequality. Furthermore, many profound changes had taken place in the country after the Civil War. Kallen believed that the overwhelming industrialization, the birth and development of the mass society, the accumulation by the few of great economic resources, and the exploitation of workers and immigrants made man become only simple numbers, units on which the civil conscience characteristic of the small and cohesive national communities had no longer any effect. Therefore, American democracy found itself having to deal with problems vastly different from those encountered by the Founding Fathers. In particular, the American population was now made up of many ethnic groups, and according to Kallen, to deny and obstruct the positive evolution of this ethnic inequality was a violation of the fundamental laws and of the spirit of the country’s institutions. Since he believed that the spirit of the American nation was still indistinct, like a chorus made up of many voices, each of whom sang in a different tone producing a cacophony, it was necessary to make a choice between the available alternatives: on one side the chorus could form a unison, as a result of the melting-pot; on the other it could create a harmony, as a result of cultural pluralism. But given that the first alternative, according to

Kallen, was in open conflict with the spirit of the Declaration of Independence, the only practicable way was the second. The result was his proposal that America should be a Commonwealth made up of different ethnic groups that would have to share the same language and the same institutional order. To this end Kallen wrote: “the common life of the commonwealth is politico-economic, and serves as the foundation and background for the realization of the distinctive individuality of *each natio* that composes it” (220). Only the external aspects of social life should be in common; the cultural and intrinsically distinctive elements of each single ethnic group had to be preserved in their integrity, in order to be able to contribute to the cultural and civil progress of the American nation and society.

Kallen concluded his article by proposing a comparison between the vision of the multi-ethnic American society that he imagined and the symphony produced by a musical orchestra, as he had already done in 1910 in “Judaism, Hebraism and Zionism”: “as in an orchestra, every type of instrument has its specific timbre and tonality, founded in its substance and form; as every type has its appropriate theme and melody in the whole symphony, 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” (220). Kallen was suggesting his idea of cultural pluralism as an acknowledgement of the ethnic structure of the country and as a refusal of the supposed and claimed supremacy of the characteristically WASP sectors of the society. Furthermore, he did not deny that the process of assimilation between the various ethnic groups was overbearingly in act: rather he questioned its validity and practicality for the future of the nation. The developing American identity was not to be monolithic, that is, the result of indistinct assimilation between all the social components of the country: it should rather be plural and characterized by the diversity of its constitutive parts, which should integrate harmoniously.

At the outset, the popularity and circulation of Kallen’s theory within public opinion was limited. The Great War had brought the brutal re-explosion of racist tensions and the spreading of anti-alien crusades throughout the country. It was therefore quite natural that the tendency toward Americanization had obtained great success among the masses, as also within the power elites and in the academic world. Nevertheless,

Kallen's cultural pluralism gained moderate influence into the Jewish circles, particularly in the Menorah Journal group and among the Zionists. At the same time, intellectuals of Yankee heritage were influenced, among whom stood Randolph Bourne. In the academic world reactions to Kallen's cultural pluralism were rather cold. Notwithstanding the fact that the interest for studying the ethnic composition of American society was becoming widespread, particularly among sociologists, cultural pluralism would hardly be considered a practical option or at least one near to realization. However, from then on, studies on the ethnic configuration of the United States had to take into account Kallen's theories. In the following years, a flourishing literature on identity questions was developing:³ as Higham has asserted, from the mid 1930s "democracy was now widely redefined along the lines Kallen had sketched, so that an equation between democracy and diversity became a fundamental premise of political and social thought" (Higham 222). Even Kallen returned, more than once, to this subject of study, publishing many essays grouped together in the books *Culture and Democracy in the United States* and *Cultural Pluralism and the American Idea*, in which he resumed and completed his previous thoughts.

Kallen's cultural pluralism represented a highly significant step in the process of construction of modern liberal thought during the Progressive Era. The difference of opinions expressed by influential members of the political and intellectual world on the immigration question amply explained the difficulties that this movement had in proposing a common cultural policy. Right-wing progressive leaders such as Theodore Roosevelt had a little consideration for the immigrants' cultural heritage, to which they preferred the imposition of the values and customs of the WASP America. According to Gary Gerstle,

in insisting upon the superiority of Americanness to ethnic and regional identities, Roosevelt revealed his ideological proximity to many European nation builders, liberal and radical, who wanted to turn peasants into Frenchmen, Scots and Welsh into Britons, and Ukrainians, Lithuanians, and Armenians into new Soviet men. All were civic nationalists who believed that to become a citizen of a democratic republic (or a workers' state) and to identify as a patriot willing to defend the republic at all costs was to ascend to the highest stage of humanity. (Gerstle 57)

At the same time many other progressives, who did not publicly take stereotyped positions on racial questions and did not subscribe to the requests for forced Americanization, looked at the dissolution of ethnic cultures and at their substitution with a specific American identity as one of the most important ends of the progressive movement. On the other hand, among the left-oriented progressives emerged a different position about cultural policies, in particular between those who worked in the settlement houses and those who showed a certain interest for educational topics. This is the case of such figures as Jane Addams, John Dewey, Horace Kallen, and Randolph Bourne. Their work supported the birth and growth of one specific orientation towards ethnic questions, conducive to the preservation and proper valorization of the diverse cultural heritages of the immigrants and their integration in a form of cosmopolitan American nationalism. It was the beginning of the First World War, with the strong radicalization of the ideological conflicts to which it gave life, which revealed the incompatibility of the different progressive approaches to the immigration question.

Kallen did not apply his ideas on cultural pluralism only to the writings on Zionism and the Jewish identity and on the multiethnic composition of the American society. This fact is clear by analyzing his considerations on the First World War. In this sense, his article which appeared in the *Menorah Journal* in April 1915, a few weeks after the publication in the *Nation* of "Democracy Versus the Melting-Pot," is very significant. In "Nationality and the Hyphenated American," Kallen explained how he linked his vision of the war and of the causes that were at its roots to the same conception on which he founded his theory of cultural pluralism. So as the attempt to impose conformism of identity within American society was the principal reason for the ethno-cultural conflicts in the country, in the same way "the attempt of one nationality to dominate and to impose its character, culture and ideals upon others" was at the root of all the great European wars (82). The idea of cultural pluralism, which on the international level implied the harmonious cooperation between different nationalities, should not limit itself only to social and cultural policies within the borders of a defined country. Kallen wondered: "is the whole of mankind to be dominated in body and in spirit, without its consent, by a portion of it, and to be compelled 'to elaborate and express the idea' of the portion? or is the whole of mankind to be self-

governed, in a cooperative commonwealth, each part of which, by elaborating and expressing its own idea, contributes its best to the whole?" (84). This, in essence, was the alternative at stake in the Great War.

Fascinated by the Wilsonian vision of the international order, Kallen was one of those who cooperated with The Inquiry, a group of scholars created by Wilson himself and by his advisor Edward Mandell House with the aim to supply the American diplomatic corps with the elements required to adequately prepare and face the future peace conference. As a result, between 1918 and 1921 he published three books on questions related to the international order the day after the First World War: *The Structure of Lasting Peace*, *The League of Nations Today and Tomorrow*, and *Zionism and World Politics*. In these works the considerations on the future of the Jewish people and the Zionist movement and on the theory of cultural pluralism were intertwined with those on the self-determination of peoples and on democratic and universalist nationalism. According to Kallen, an ethnic nationality should not necessarily be defined politically through the exercise of an exclusive sovereignty on a determined area. What counted was that every distinct nationality had the opportunity to express itself in a cultural way: as he wrote in *The Structure of Lasting Peace* "nationality... is to the group what personality is to the individual: tradition is its memory; custom its habits; history its biography; language, literature, the arts, religion, are its mind. Together these form its culture, and culture in the nationality is character in the individual" (25-26). Kallen greatly admired the work of Giuseppe Mazzini, whom he considered to be the best interpreter of the democratic theory of nationality, opposed to the imperialistic version whose most complete expression had been achieved by the Central Empires. Therefore, contrary to those nationalistic tendencies which gave the foundations to the spreading of imperialistic ideologies, militarism, and discrimination towards minorities, Kallen had a universalist conception of the national idea, connected in a positive way to the self-determination of peoples in a context characterized by liberal and democratic values.

In the light of the considerations on Zionism elaborated in the early 1910s, it is clear how Kallen began to reflect on identity questions starting from the sphere of international politics. Accordingly, the theory of cultural pluralism was the transposition, within the multi-ethnic American society, of Kallen's conception of the role of ethnic groups in the wider context of

mankind. In this sense, his reflections on nationalism and on the international order subsequent to the renowned article “Democracy Versus the Melting-Pot” confirm this ‘conceptual step’. Kallen therefore conceived the United States as a *microcosm*, so that the same logic and the same principles which, according to him, should have made the peaceful cooperation and coexistence of different nationalities on the international scene – and therefore at a *macrocosm* level – possible, could also have been applied to the relationships between different ethnic groups in the *microcosm* embodied by the multi-ethnic American society. In a certain sense the multiethnic structure of the American society at the beginning of the twentieth century reflected, in miniature, the configuration of the international order. If the global solution to conflicts and wars was the harmonious cooperation of peoples based on the mutual acknowledgment of reciprocal differences, in the same way the United States could not think of resolving the identity question through the forced homologation to the Anglo-Saxon pattern or through the refusal of the alien – only the valorization of differences could have guaranteed a future of peaceful social coexistence.

A deeper analysis of Kallen’s work of the 1910s shows how the theory of cultural pluralism was born in a wider and more complex context than that represented by the debate on the identity question in the United States. His more mature reflections regarding this subject should therefore be considered in the light of the remarks on Zionism and the international order contained in the works published between 1909 and 1921. Moreover, as evidence of how much the theory of cultural pluralism was indebted towards the reflection on Jewish identity, Kallen himself, in his 1933 book *Individualism*, wrote: “it is upon the foundation and against the background of my Jewish cultural milieu that my vision of America was grown” (5). These observations demonstrate how Kallen’s multiculturalism was also the outcome of a wider effort, waged by a growing number of Jewish intellectuals, to challenge the prevailing view of American society’s distinctiveness and its future direction. It was precisely in response to the massive migrations experienced by the United States between 1880 and 1924 that a new pluralist perception of the country’s ethnic composition was being devised. In this context American Jews played a determining role, heavily contributing to dispute the characteristically Protestant grounds of public discussion. This fact has been well emphasized by David Hollinger in his book *Science, Jews, and Secular Culture*:

There arose from within the Jewish population an articulate and energetic minority of intellectuals ... what made these intellectuals special was their manifest failure to be Jewish parochials. This applied to many of the Zionist as well as the non-Zionist intellectuals in the group ... Like their European prototypes Marx, Freud, and Durkheim, these emancipated Jews engaged the same 'universal' discourses that American professors and authors had reproduced in terms more distinctly Protestant than would be widely acknowledged until later. (Hollinger 19)

Therefore, the transition from a typically WASP to a more pluralistic public culture had been the result of the contemporary emergence and the spread of a secularized scientific outlook and of the demographic diversification brought by immigration. The Jewish contribution to this development, concretized through a growing presence within American universities and intellectual circles, was certainly highly determining. For that reason, the idea of the United States as a microcosm, born in the context of Kallen's Zionist commitment, was also the outcome of the wider and evergrowing weight of Jewish intellectuals on the American cultural setting. Consequently, the genealogy of Kallen's conception of ethnic identities hitherto discussed can be fully considered one of the main stages in the evolution to the pluralistic configuration of modern American public sphere.

Notes

¹ The present-day popularity of Kallen's cultural pluralism is attested, among many others, by the works of Werner Sollors, Michael Walzer, David A. Hollinger, Everett Akam, Jonathan Hansen, and Samuel Huntington.

² The most interesting articles in which Kallen forthrightly criticized Reform Judaism, reedited in *Judaism at Bay*, were "Hebraism and Current Tendencies in Philosophy" (1909): 7-15; "On the Import of Universal Judaism" (1910): 16-27; "Judaism, Hebraism and Zionism" (1910): 28-41; "Judaism and the Modern Point of View" (1911): 42-56.

³ The main works on the identity question published between the 1920s and 1950s were those by Isaac Berkson, Robert Park, Alain Locke, Melville Herskovits, and Gunnar Myrdal.

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