

Efforts at Americanization in the Industrial Workplace, 1914–1921

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Americanization involved the social and cultural assimilation of immigrants into the mainstream of American life. However, the process also constituted a unique, and distinctly American, method for the resolution of a key industrial problem—the problem of work-discipline and of the adjustment of new workers to the factory environment. In the early twentieth century, the Ford Motor Company established an Americanization program in order to adapt immigrant workers to its new system of mass production. This [article] will examine the Americanization policies and practices of the Ford Sociological Department, a novel experiment in welfare capitalism, and the Ford English School, an institution which taught immigrant workers the English language. It will treat both institutions in relation to the problem of the adaptation of an immigrant workforce to new conditions of production.

For the most part, Americanization has not usually been the concern of labor or industrial historians. Historians of Americanization have generally emphasized the differences between American and immigrant cultures. Edward G. Hartmann, the movement's principal historian, examined the early Americanization campaign from this perspective. . . . He concluded that:

the Americanization effort stressed the desirability of the rapid assimilation of the millions of immigrants who had come to America during the pre-war decades, through the attendance of the newcomers at special classes, lectures, and mass meetings, where they might be instructed in the language, the ideals, and on the life which had come to be accepted as the American way of life.

In this form, the Americanization campaign was voluntary, benevolent, and educational. Nevertheless, when the programs emanated from within factory gates, they had their darker side. The issue was not simply different national or ethnic cultures, but also pre-industrial and industrial cultures, and even class cultures. Americanization was an important movement for the adjustment of immigrant workers to a new industrial environment and to American urban and industrial conditions, not just to American society in the abstract.

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Even before the development of the modern system of mass production, Ford officials and managers proposed their industrial ethos to a predominantly German and American workforce. For example, in 1908, the *Ford Times* provided a model New Year's resolution for Ford employees. "Of my own free will and accord, I sincerely covenant with myself," the resolution began. It later continued:

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To exalt the Gospel of Work, and get action here and now. To keep head, heart, and hand so busy that I won't have time to think about my troubles.
 Because idleness is a disgrace, low aim is criminal, and work minus its spiritual quality becomes drudgery.

Over and over again, in anecdotes, homilies, and stories, Ford literature for workers reiterated similar outlines of the American work ethic with the prospect of upward mobility as a reward for patience, self-denial, and hard work. Later, as more and more immigrants streamed into the newly mechanized Highland Park factory, the Ford Americanization program propounded similar socio-cultural themes for the new workers.

Modern mass production profoundly altered the character of the Ford factory and the Ford workforce. Developed from 1910 to 1914, the new methods and techniques of production drastically diluted the skills necessary for factory operations. Consequently, as the physical plant expanded to meet the growing demand for the Model T Ford, thousands of unskilled Southern and Eastern European immigrants swarmed into the Highland Park factory. By 1914, the Ford Motor Company employed 12,880 workers and the overwhelming majority (9,109) were foreign-born. The five largest nationality groups—Poles, Russians, Romanians, Italians and Sicilians, and Austro-Hungarians—constituted a majority of the workforce and came from the least industrialized areas of Europe. Generally, American industrial leaders and factory managers rated these nationalities low in their “racial efficiency,” as they defined industrial skill and efficiency in terms of work-habits and work-discipline. In addition, the immigrant workers’ non-American styles and standards of living compounded the problems of their preindustrial origins and preindustrial attitudes and habits. In their homes, their neighborhoods, and their separate networks of economic, social, and cultural interaction, immigrant workers maintained residues of their former cultures and remained in isolation from the broader American society. Finally, middle-class and other Americans believed that the isolation and autonomy of immigrant communities generated alien and radical social philosophies. . . .

Ford officials, managers, and engineers expressed the most concern about the immigrants’ poor and inefficient habits of work. These men . . . found that productivity under actual factory conditions fell far short of anticipated levels derived from ideal laboratory conditions. . . .

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In the new Ford factory, the rates of absenteeism and labor turnover steadily rose with the completion of the new productive system. In 1913, “daily absences” amounted to a staggering ten per cent of the entire workforce. This meant that an average of from 1,300 to 1,400 workers were absent from their work stations each day. For the same year, the rate of labor turnover reached a phenomenal 370 per cent. In order to maintain a workforce of about 13,600 workers, the company hired over 52,000 workers in the course of a year. The numbers indicated a complete lack of work-discipline. Yet the new methods and techniques of production required new and more severe forms of work discipline. It needed workers more closely attuned to the coordinated regimen of the machines and assembly lines. The preindustrial culture of immigrant workers had to be restructured to meet the requirements of new and more sophisticated industrial operations.

At this point, Ford inaugurated his grand experiment in welfare capitalism. Announced in January 1914 and popularly known as the Five Dollar Day, it was an ingenious profit-sharing scheme to induce Ford workers to alter their attitudes and habits to meet the rigorous requirements of mass production. Under the Ford Profit Sharing Plan, the company divided an unskilled worker's income into two approximately equal parts—his wages and his profits. Each worker received his wages for work done in the factory. But he received his profits, and, hence, the Five Dollar Day, only when he met specific standards of productive efficiency and specific standards and conditions of domestic life. The "work standard" for a particular job and the pace of the assembly line determined the standard of efficiency.

In addition a new institution, the Ford Sociological Department, later named the Ford Educational Department, examined the Ford worker's domestic life and attempted to elevate him and his family to a proper "American" standard of living. Ford and his managers held the progressive notion that environment shaped and molded men's attitudes, values, and habits. Their new institution sought to improve the worker's home and neighborhood environment in order to improve his ideas and behavior toward the factory. The Sociological Department investigated each worker and interviewed his family, friends, and neighbors. If the worker met specified requirements—"thrift, honesty, sobriety, better housing, and better living generally"—he received the Five Dollar Day. If not, the company withheld his profits and a Ford advisor periodically counselled on how to mend his ways. If after six months, the worker did not raise himself to Ford standards, the company discharged him.

The Ford Profit Sharing Plan was deeply paternalistic. In this feature, it captured the Progressive Era's contradictory attitude toward the unskilled immigrant worker. On the one hand, it attempted to assist the worker and to elevate him to a better standard of life. On the other hand, it sought to manipulate or to coerce the worker to match a preconceived ideal of that better life. John R. Commons, the progressive labor historian, noted the double edged character of the Ford program. The Ford plan, he reported, "is just old fashioned industrial autocracy tempered by faith in human nature." A benevolent end—the uplift of the unskilled and unschooled immigrant worker—justified a manipulative and coercive means.

From the very beginning, the Ford Profit Sharing Plan attempted to fit the immigrant worker into its preconceived mold of the ideal American. An early memorandum clarified the objectives of the Ford plan to a branch manager. "It is our aim and object," the Home Office noted, "to make better men and better American citizens and to bring about a larger degree of comforts, habits, and a higher plane of living among our employees. . . ." Henry Ford expressed his concern about non-American workers to an interviewer: "These men of many nations must be taught the American ways, the English language, and the right way to live." He then elaborated on the "right" life for the foreign-born worker. Married men "should not sacrifice family rights, pleasure, and comfort by filling their homes with roomers and boarders." Single men should live "comfortably and under conditions that make for good manhood and good citizenship." A company report on progress among immigrant workers noted that the Ford ideal was to create "a comfortable and cozy domesticity."

In its literature for workers, the Ford Motor Company repeatedly advised them where and how to live. A pamphlet pointed toward "right" living conditions:

Employees should live in clean, well conducted homes, in rooms that are well lighted and ventilated. Avoid congested parts of the city. . . .

Ford and his managers deeply believed that tenement life in the immigrant neighborhoods of the city polluted body and soul. They also considered physical and moral cleanliness important attributes for work in modern industrial society. A clean home reduced the chances for illness and absenteeism. A clean mind provided the sound foundation for the construction of good work habits.

The Ford Sociological Department even extended its interest and attention to the children of immigrant workers. It prescribed a strong dose of Victorian morality for them in order to promote and develop good bodies and souls. "Choose a home," a pamphlet advised:

where ample room, good wholesome surroundings, will enable the children to get the greatest benefit possible from play, under conditions that will tend to clean helpful ideas, rather than those likely to be formed in the streets and alleys of the city.

Particularly in adolescence, young men and women "should be guarded well, and not allowed to contract habits and vices injurious to their welfare and health."

S. S. Marquis, who headed the Ford Sociological Department, recalled Ford's own reason for this concern about the morality of children. "By underpaying men," Ford told the *Episcopalian* minister:

we are bringing up a generation of children undernourished and underdeveloped morally as well as physically; we are breeding a generation of workingmen weak in body and mind, and for that reason bound to prove inefficient when they come to take their places in industry.

The good worker was both physically fit to perform his tasks in the factory and morally fit to perform these tasks diligently.

Often, Ford's paternalistic advice on the care of the home and family contained overt manifestations of middle-class arrogance towards the new immigrant workers. In one instance, a Ford pamphlet advised:

Employees should use plenty of soap and water in the home, and upon their children, bathing frequently. Nothing makes for right living and health so much as cleanliness. Notice that the most advanced people are the cleanest.

Again, the advice cut in two directions. On the one hand, health and cleanliness were important for immigrant workers. On the other hand, the assumption was that lower classes were generally unclean. Indeed, these sentiments typified upper- and middle-class American attitudes towards Southern and Eastern European immigrants.

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In 1915, several Ford investigators wrote a number of "Human Interest" stories and other reports to describe the Sociological Department's welfare work among Ford workers. . . . Horatio Alger style stories told how Southern and Eastern European immigrant workers met their good fortune in the form of the Five Dollar Day. One story involved a Russian immigrant and his family. . . .

F. W. Andrews, a Ford investigator, wrote his story on Joe, a former peasant, his wife, and their six children. Three years earlier, they left Russia for the United States. "Life was an uphill struggle for Joe since landing in America," Andrews reported. However, he had a positive trait—his willingness to work hard. "He was a willing worker and not particular about the kind of employment he secured." In the recent past, he dug sewers and worked as an agricultural laborer. When work ran out, he moved to Detroit with his family. "And here," Andrews noted, "for five long months he tramped with the 'Army of the Unemployed'—always handicapped by his meager knowledge of the English language, and was unable to find anything to do." As a result, his wife bore the "burden of supporting the family." She "worked at the washtub or with the scrubbing brush when such work could be found."

Fortunately, the tale continued, Joe applied for and received a job at the Ford factory. After the company hired him, Andrews went to Joe's home to determine his eligibility for the Ford Five Dollar Day. The scene could have been from a Dickens novel. He discovered "an old, tumbled down, one and a half story frame house." The family's apartment, Andrews related, "was one half of the attic consisting of three rooms, which were so low that a person of medium height could not stand erect—a filthy, foul-smelling hole." It had virtually no furniture, only "two dirty beds . . . , a ragged filthy rug, a rickety table, and two bottomless chairs (the five children standing up at the table to eat)." The family led a precarious hand-to-mouth existence and ate only when the wife earned enough to purchase food for the evening meal. They owed money to the landlord, the grocer, and the butcher. The oldest daughter went to a charity hospital a few days earlier. The wife and the other five children "were half clad, pale, and hungry looking."

This scene of poverty and misery set the Sociological Department's paternalistic programs into motion. Through special arrangements, the pay office issued Joe's wages each day instead of every two weeks. The company provided him with an immediate loan from its charity fund for "the family's immediate start toward right living." However, the investigator, and not Joe, took the fifty-dollar loan and paid the bills and rented a cottage. He also purchased inexpensive furniture and kitchen utensils, provisions, and cheap clothes for the wife and children. (Andrews reported that he bought "a liberal amount of soap" and gave the family "instructions to use freely.")

After Andrews arranged for this initial assistance for Joe and his family, a remarkable ritual followed. The Ford investigator:

. . . had their dirty, old, junk furniture loaded on a dray and under the cover of night moved them to their new home. This load of rubbish was heaped in a pile in the back yard, and a torch was applied and it went up in smoke.

There upon the ashes of what had been their earthly possessions, this Russian peasant and his wife, with tears streaming down their faces, expressed their gratitude to Henry Ford, the FORD MOTOR COMPANY, and all those who had been instrumental in bringing about this marvelous change in their lives.

In this ritual of fire, an old life went up in smoke as Joe and his family testified to their loyalty to Henry Ford.

In time, the children were well dressed and clean. They attended public school. The wife wore "a smile that 'won't come off.'" Joe soon repaid his loan and expected "to soon have a saving for the inevitable 'rainy day.'"

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Against [this uplifting case], a single and revealing incident demonstrated the motives of the company's concern for the ways in which immigrant traditions affected industrial efficiency. In January 1914, a few days after its impressive gesture—the announcement of the Five Dollar Day—the Ford Motor Company dismissed "between eight and nine hundred Greeks and Russians, who remained from work on a holiday celebration." The holiday happened to be Christmas. Using the Julian calendar, the Greek and Russian Orthodox Christian workers celebrated Christmas thirteen days later than the rest of the Ford workforce. As justification for this large-scale dismissal, which amounted to about six per cent of the Ford workforce, a Ford official stated that "if these men are to make their home in America they should observe American holidays." The absence of this many workers disrupted production in the mechanized Highland Park plant. "It causes too much confusion in the plant," the official concluded, ". . . when nearly a thousand men fail to appear for work."

The Ford English School extended the Ford Americanization program into the classroom. Its exclusive concern was the Americanization of the immigrant worker and his adaptation to the Ford factory and to urban and industrial society. In the English School, as adult immigrant workmen struggled to learn and to comprehend the strange sounds of a new language, they also received the rudiments of American culture. In particular, they learned those habits of life which resulted in good habits of work. In 1916, S. S. Marquis defended the objectives of the Ford educational program before an audience of American educators. The Ford English School, he noted, "was established especially for the immigrants in our employ." It was one part of a total program to adapt men to the new factory system. "The Ford School," he reported:

provides five compulsory courses. There is a course in industry and efficiency, a course in thrift and economy, a course in domestic relations, one in community relations, and one in industrial relations.

Later, using the Ford factory as a metaphor for the entire educational program, he added:

This is the human product we seek to turn out, and as we adapt the machinery in the shop to turning out the kind of automobile we have in mind, so we have constructed our educational system with a view to producing the human product in mind.

The Ford managers and engineers devised a system wherein men were the raw materials which were molded, hammered, and shaped into products which had the proper attitudes and habits for work in the factory.

In April 1914, the Ford Motor Company called upon Peter Roberts, a Young Men's Christian Association educator, to develop a program of English language instructor for immigrant workers in the Highland Park factory. In 1909, as the result of his activities among immigrant coal miners in Pennsylvania, Roberts pub-

lished a preparatory course of English language instruction, *English for Coming Americans*. This course provided a complete package of materials to teach the basic elements of the English language. The core of the program centered around a Domestic, a Commercial, and an Industrial Series of lessons. Each series applied the English language to different aspects of the immigrant worker's life. . . .

The Domestic Series provided specific English lessons for the immigrant worker in his role as the head of an "American" family unit. This series, Roberts explained, identified "the experiences common to all peoples reared in the customs of western civilization." The ten lessons included such topics as "Getting Up in the Morning," "Table Utensils," "The Man Washing," and "Welcoming a Visitor."

The Commercial Series supplied the immigrant worker with the vocabulary to serve in his role as a consumer. In particular, it attempted to break the economic power of immigrant bosses, who sold goods and services, who served as employment, travel, and shipping agents, and who functioned as bankers in the immigrant neighborhoods. Moreover, the lessons emphasized and encouraged the virtues of thrift and property ownership, which created stable and reliable citizens. . . .

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The lessons intended to make the immigrant worker a consumer of American goods and services from American merchants. In this series, the subject matter included "Buying and Using Stamps," "Pay Day," "Going to the Bank," "Buying a Lot," "Building a House."

Finally, the Industrial Series provided flexible lessons to meet the immigrant worker's needs as a producer in the factory. The aim of this series was "to meet the need of thousands who have common experience in industrial life." Here, the lessons included "Beginning the Day's Work," "Shining Shoes," "A Man Looking for Work," and "Finishing the Day's Work."

The lessons in each series had characteristically prosaic titles. And, indeed, the lessons provided helpful and useful information for the immigrant worker. Nevertheless, each lesson contained specific social and cultural norms for life in urban and industrial America. Ford workers learned the value of time in their personal and working lives. They learned the importance of cleanliness and health. They learned self-discipline through regular habits of saving and work. They learned to invest in and to purchase property and to become responsible citizens. These positive virtues—timeliness, cleanliness, thrift, self-discipline, regularity, and citizenship—represented the Ford, and generally the American middle-class, ideal for remaking former European peasants into reliable and efficient factory workers. The English language was an important means for the adaptation of immigrant workers to the regimen and the discipline of the mechanized factory.

As part of its instructional program, the Ford English School also taught immigrant workers not to offend their social betters in their manner and their behavior. For this reason, table manners and etiquette were important parts of the curriculum. "Last, but not least," S. S. Marquis reported, "must be mentioned our professor of table manners who with great dramatic art teaches the use of napkins, knife and fork and spoon." The Ford instructor taught the immigrant worker "the art of eating a meal in a manner that will not interfere with the appetite of the other

fellow." In addition, Marquis continued: "We also have a professor of etiquette, such as is required for the ordinary station in life." Moreover, Ford English instructors expected their students to dress properly for the classes. "A by-product of the classes," a report noted, "was a rise in the 'standard of living' by making men conscious of their personal appearance." Instead of going directly from work to school, the instructors required that "class members first go home, wash, and change clothes."

In 1919, Clinton C. DeWitt, the Director of the Ford English School, defended the Ford system of industrial Americanization with its practical teachers from the shop floor before an unfriendly audience of American educators. He argued that "a real live American born man, who is a leader among the fellows of his department" would make "in a short time out of Europe's downtrodden and outcasts, good Americans." He also catalogued the advantages of the industrial teacher:

... both teacher and student have so many things in common. He works for the same employer, he works the same hours, he has the same pay day, he has the same environment, he has the same legal holidays, he refers to the same head office, the same pay office, the same superintendent's office, the same safety department, the same Americanization school. The main doorway, the different buildings, and all the printed signs are thoroughly common to teacher and student.

From DeWitt's perspective, the factory hierarchy facilitated instruction. The foreman, the natural leader in his shop, instructed his subordinates in the English language, American values and customs, and Ford shop practices.

In 1915, Oliver J. Abell, an industrialist journalist, praised Ford's "benevolent paternalism" in industry. He maintained that the "greater must care for the less." Furthermore, he continued:

We provide schools for the child. Instruction and discipline are compulsory, and it is well. But we forget that measured in the great scale of knowledge, there are always children and grownups, pupils and teachers, and age is nothing.

Here, Abell captured the essence of Ford paternalism and of the relationship between dominant and subordinate groups in American society. Superiors considered their inferiors—Blacks, servants, women, and even workers—as no more than children. Indeed, the Ford immigrant worker was no more than a child to be socialized, in this case, Americanized, to the reigning social and cultural norms of American society.

S. S. Marquis, the liberal clergyman, explained how the company coerced workers into attending their English lessons. "Attendance," he reported:

is virtually compulsory. If a man declines to go, the advantages of the training are carefully explained to him. If he still hesitates, he is laid off and given uninterrupted meditation and reconsideration. When it comes to promotion, naturally preference is given to the men who have cooperated with us in our work. This, also, has its effect.

In the early twentieth century, Ford officials duplicated the disciplinary patterns which early industrialists utilized in eighteenth-century England. The carrot and the stick rewarded or punished the worker as though he were an errant child.

Gregory Mason, a strong advocate of Americanization programs, questioned "the grotesquely exaggerated patriotism in the Ford plant." In the course of the

English lessons, "the pupils are told to 'walk to an American blackboard, taken a piece of American chalk, and explain how the American workman walks to his American home and sits down with his American family to their good American dinner.'" "The first thing we teach them to say," Marquis related, "is 'I am a good American,' and then we try to get them to live up to that statement." "It is a very common thing," DeWitt noted, "to have a fellow born in Austria yell to a teacher passing by, 'We are all good Americans!'" In this period, Ford and other employers began to give good citizenship and Americanism their own definition. A Ford pamphlet noted:

Automatically, upon graduation, the English school alumni become members of the American Club. At weekly meetings they practice speaking, reading, debating, and discuss points of history, civil government, and national problems of current interest.

By the end of the First World War, Americanism countered those social and economic philosophies which threatened managerial prerogatives of production, namely Bolshevism, socialism, and even trade unionism.

The mass ritual of graduation was the most spectacular aspect of Americanization in the Ford factory. Ford English School graduates underwent a symbolic ritual which marked the transformation from immigrant to American. DeWitt describes the ceremony as:

a pageant in the form of a melting pot, where all men descend from a boat scene representing the vessel on which they came over; down the gangway . . . into a pot 15 feet in diameter and 7-1/2 feet high, which represents the Ford English School. Six teachers, three on either side, stir the pot with ten foot ladles representing nine months of teaching in the school. Into the pot 52 nationalities with their foreign clothes and baggage go and out of the pot after vigorous stirring by the teachers comes one nationality, viz, American.

Marquis enriched this image and emphasized the conformity of the one nationality: "Presently the pot began to boil over and out came the men dressed in their best American clothes and waving American flags."

Following this pageant, teachers and community leaders gave speeches which praised the virtues of American citizenship. When the graduation ceremony ended, all went on "a trip to some park, where American games are played by teachers and students for the rest of the day." In the evening, the company rewarded its volunteer teachers for their time and their efforts. It held "an entertainment and banquet for the volunteer instructors and their wives. The expense, of course, being paid by the company." At this celebration, DeWitt reported, "the teachers meet with Mr. Ford and other high officials of the company, and a great spirit of one for all and all for one predominates the entire evening."

Americanization in the Ford factory was important for a number of reasons. First, the Ford programs touched the lives of tens of thousands of Ford workers in its effort to influence those institutions which shaped working-class culture—the home, the neighborhood, and the factory. From 1914 to 1917, Ford statistics, derived from the reports of sociological investigators, revealed that bank accounts, home and property ownership, neighborhoods, home conditions, and habits of Ford workers either increased or improved. In addition, from 1915 to 1920, the company reported that some 16,000 workers graduated from the Ford English

School. Moreover, statistics indicated that while 35.5 per cent of the workforce did not speak English in 1914, only 11.7 per cent did not speak the language in 1917. Second, the Ford Americanization programs indirectly captured the American imagination in the prewar years. They served as the model for a city-wide Americanization campaign in Detroit. And, in 1915, Detroit in turn became the model for the National Americanization Day Committee and its national campaign for the assimilation of immigrants into American society.

Finally, Ford was neither alone nor entirely unique in its attempt to adapt immigrant workers to factory and industrial life. In fact, American industrial leaders and managers developed a new and different strategy for the management of an immigrant workforce in this period. Whereas the traditional managerial practice divided ethnic groups and played their national and cultural rivalries against one another, the new one emphasized conformity with American social, cultural, and industrial values. During the First World War, as manufacturers and managers became increasingly apprehensive about aliens in their midst, they viewed Americanization as a means to remake immigrant workers into their image of efficient and productive American workers. Through cooperative efforts with industry, Peter Roberts and other Y.M.C.A. educators established programs which employed thousands of instructors and taught tens of thousands of foreign workers. And, in the postwar labor upsurge, industrial leaders considered Americanization as the cure for the ills of industrial society. In 1919, George F. Quimby, the keynote speaker of the National Conference on Americanization in Industries, emphasized that the conference should be “based on the fundamental principles of American life—a sound social order.” In 1920, Peter Roberts gave citizenship a broad social and economic definition. “Good citizenship,” he noted, “means each one in his sphere keeping busy, doing honest work, and contributing to the sum total of wealth for the support of the nation.”

In the end, Ford paternalism failed, and, perhaps, even proved irrelevant. Its success rested on the monetary incentive of the Five Dollar Day. Even for un-schooled immigrants, money, and not patronizing benevolence, talked in the industrial age. Wartime economic conditions undermined the Ford high income policy. As the new methods of production rapidly diffused to Detroit’s other automobile and machine shops, Ford lost the technological and financial advantage over its competitors. In addition, a severe war-induced inflation eroded the incentive of the Five Dollar Day. Gradually, the company shifted the differential between wages and profits.