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REVIEWS

Hahner, Leslie A. *To Become an American: Immigrants and Americanization Campaigns of the Early Twentieth Century*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State UP, 2017. Pp. 282. ISBN: 978-1611 862539.

The immigrants who arrived in the United States from Southern and Eastern Europe in great number at the turn of the twentieth century were considered different and more difficult to assimilate than previous immigrants from Western Europe, so various government institutions and local organizations set out to find viable methods of instilling American civic values, such as patriotism, in them. This movement, known as Americanization, gathered momentum at the onset of the First World War, when the “new” immigrants were expected to sever all ties with their countries of origin and, instead, to display 100% percent loyalty to the United States, thus demonstrating complete allegiance to their country of adoption. In recent scholarship, the process of Americanization in the early twentieth century has been approached from a variety of perspectives, with particular emphasis on the educational materials and activities created in schools or other Americanizing organizations to acquaint young and adult immigrants with the American ways (Pozzetta 1991; Nemanic 2007; Mirel 2010; NeCamp 2014; among others). In *To Become an American: Immigrants and Americanization Campaigns of the Early Twentieth Century*, however, Leslie Hahner proposes a fresh approach by employing rhetorical criticism to analyze how “the visual and aesthetic practices of Americanization” changed the ways in which Americans came “to understand, interpret, and judge

their own patriotism and that of others” (xvi), thus “reshap[ing] the visual character of nationalism” (xvii) at the time.

The book is divided into six chapters, which, based on information from primary sources and archival material, examine the rhetorical effects of different types of public visual displays as part of the larger Americanization movement. Hahner aptly structures each chapter around a specific trope, pointing out that “tropes explain how immigrants were induced to perform as Americans, and the way these practices collectively generated the interpretive rubrics against which patriotism was assessed” (23). Starting from the premise that analyzing the “visual logic of Americanization” through the lens of rhetorical criticism facilitates a better understanding of how it transformed the concept of nationalism, the first chapter examines the larger impact of various elements of the rhetoric of civic nationalism, such as nativism, eugenics, and race-based critiques regarding the assimilation potential (or lack thereof) of the “new” immigrants, in the first decades of the twentieth century. In the second chapter, Hahner introduces the first trope, prolepsis, a rhetorical “figure of anticipation,” to illustrate how different “Americanization pedagogies and visual aids” were meant to spark the “affective foundation of emotional nationalism” (31). The chapter discusses the rhetoric and the impact of the visual aids employed by various Americanization organizations at the time – such as the stereopticon slides in schools, the films in the Ford Educational Weekly Series for immigrant workers, the America First poster, and the images displayed in the photographic textbooks published by the American Viewpoint Society to promote Americanization – arguing that the main goal of these educational materials was to inculcate a desire “for the comfort of national belonging” (63) in young and adult immigrants.

Extending the discussion to the larger community, Hahner uses the next trope, synecdoche, “a figure of substitution” (66), in the third chapter, which focuses on how “the rhetorical pedagogy of housing and community reform” (67) reflected the attempts to foster patriotic allegiance by “transforming the homes and

communities of immigrants” (66). Upon examining the rhetoric of the 1916 contest organized jointly by the National Americanization Committee and the Chamber of Commerce, Hahner concludes that one of the goals of the housing reform was to show that “living as an American was an outward expression of the immigrant’s internal dedication to national ideals” (88). Metalepsis, “an extended or double figuration – when a common trope or maxim . . . is used in a new way” (94) is employed by Hahner in the fourth chapter to discuss various patriotic celebrations and festivities (for instance, patriotic pageantry and public singing as part of Americanization Day and Flag Day activities) with a view to demonstrating the fraught ambiguity of “the paradoxical visual logic of emotional nationalism” (96). The fifth chapter focuses on a comparative approach of the ways in which “the visual and performative rhetorical pedagogies” (123) employed by two girl clubs, the Girl Scouts and the Camp Fire Girls, attempted to teach young immigrants how to “act as Americans” through “performance of national rituals and proficient domesticity” (124). The use of *prosopopoeia*, the rhetorical trope signifying playing a role and identifying with it, allows Hahner to look at the Americanization activities of these two organizations so as to demonstrate how “the Americanized immigrant member refracted the patriotism and dedication of the larger organization” (138).

In the last chapter, Hahner examines “the paradox of Americanization,” regarded both as a successful and a failed movement – mostly because of the immigrants’ “inability to prove their Americanism” (162) – further contending that “the paradoxical visual logic” “played into anxieties about racial and ethnic difference,” which, in turn, “prompted an obsessive concern with demonstrating patriotism” (155). Moreover, she points out that “the paradox of this visual logic” helped to reconceptualize “public understandings of who could become an American” (173) as “Americanization on a broader scale managed the public’s understanding of nationalism” (175). Creating a bridge to the twenty-first century at the end of the chapter, Hahner concludes that “by analyzing the visual contours of citizenship in the early

twentieth century, scholars can gain a more robust understanding of the tensions of modern nationalism” (193).

Overall, Hahner’s insightful and well-researched study represents a valuable contribution that expands and enriches the scholarly conversation on the merits and pitfalls of the Americanization movement in the first decades of the twentieth century. As she has poignantly demonstrated, employing the theoretical lens of rhetorical criticism has allowed for a more in-depth understanding of the complexity of the Americanization attempts to assimilate immigrants during a fraught historical period, in the years before and shortly after the First World War. Furthermore, the tropological approach proposed by Hahner highlights “the paradox of the visual logic of Americanization,” demonstrating how the movement managed to redefine the constituent elements of nationalism and what it meant to be an American at the time. Therefore, Hahner’s book provides a framework for future research on the imbrication of public and private instances of civic allegiance of past and/or present immigrants. At the same time, her study prompts further reflection on the individual and collective significance of the power of the “visual logic” of Americanization in the social, cultural, and political milieu of the early twentieth century, as well as on the possible connections with contemporary perceptions of immigrant assimilation and/or the impact of public display of patriotism in American society today.

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