



Celebrating Cultural Diversity in the 1920s

Author(s): Diana Selig

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Celebrating Cultural Diversity in the 1920s

The “tribal twenties,” according to most accounts, was an era marked by racism and nativism. The decade brought the passage of strict immigration restriction laws, an upsurge in anti-Catholic sentiment, the entrenchment of Jim Crow segregation in the South, lynchings and racial violence, the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan, the establishment of the border patrol to limit Mexican immigration, and anti-Japanese agitation on the West Coast. Cultural anxieties led many native-born white Protestants to seek ways to limit the influence of immigrants and racial minorities and to halt the social transformations that accompanied modernization. Proponents of scientific racism argued for the genetic superiority of northern Europeans, while advocates of the melting pot theory of Americanization aimed to strip immigrants of their Old World traditions.

But the 1920s also gave rise to efforts to embrace America’s cultural diversity. Even as many Americans reacted to immigration with fear and alarm, others urged respect for racial, ethnic, and religious minorities. These activists rejected eugenics and the melting pot model, proposing instead that the nation benefited from the cultural backgrounds of its many peoples. Each group had made—and would continue to make—important contributions to American life. Liberal thinkers urged the preservation and sharing of ethnoracial traditions as a way to enrich the common culture. Minority group identity, they argued, was compatible with American institutions and ideals and could be a source of strength for the country.

Intellectual developments of the era helped precipitate these efforts. The theory of cultural pluralism, most clearly expressed by writer Horace Kallen, urged the persistence of ethnic groups as a means to national unity. In Kallen’s metaphor, the nation was a symphony orchestra in which each group played an instrument. The cultural relativism of anthropologist Franz Boas and his students offered another framework for rejecting racial hierarchies and valuing cultural traditions. According to Boasian theory, which began to shape popular understandings by the 1920s, racial differences were

due to environmental rather than hereditary forces and no race was inherently superior to another. At the same time, the peace movement that emerged after World War I advocated respect for all nations and peoples as a way to eliminate racial strife and abolish war. Peace activists argued that people taught to respect differences at home would be less likely to wage war overseas.



Photograph of Rachel Davis DuBois. DuBois initiated school assembly programs for intercultural understanding in the 1920s. (Image courtesy of Swarthmore College Peace Collection.)

These insights inspired liberal activists and educators. In schools and churches and homes around the country, they designed programs to combat racial, ethnic, and religious prejudice, implementing cultural pluralism on a grassroots level. They voiced liberal faith in the power of education to transform the social order. In an era that brought the expansion of American high schools, these activists directed their programs at young people in particular, who promised the best hope for a future of tolerance and understanding. They predicted optimistically that the celebration of cultural difference would eliminate prejudice in the next generation, creating an inclusive American identity and reinvigorating American society.

This teaching strategy explores the work of Rachel Davis DuBois, a white Quaker from New Jersey who in the 1920s pioneered school assembly programs on the contributions of various cultural groups to American life. Born in 1892, DuBois (who was no relation to W.E.B. Du Bois, although they became friends), took part in the post-World War I peace movement before becoming a teacher. At Woodbury High School in New Jersey, she designed a series of assembly programs that discussed ethnoracial groups one by one. She aimed to replace stereotypes with positive images. Since prejudice resulted from ignorance, she believed that greater knowledge about each group’s achievements would bring sympathy and understanding. She timed the order to coincide with holidays—Italians at Columbus Day, the British and Native Americans at Thanksgiving, African Americans at Lincoln’s birthday. Students and teachers helped plan and direct the programs, which often included guest speakers from the cultural groups. In the 1920s, she directed these programs at the white native-born children

who would come to hold dominant positions in American society.

DuBois went on to become a national leader in the antiprejudice movement. The "Woodbury Plan," as she called her assembly series, became the basis for the educational programs that she promoted throughout a long career. In the 1930s, she established a clearinghouse on intercultural education, published widely on the contributions of ethnoracial groups to American life, and designed the first teacher-training courses on the topic. Her work suggests that reactions to cultural diversity in the 1920s were complex and varied.

National Standards

Era 7: The Emergence of Modern America (1890-1930)

Standard 3: How the United States changed from the end of World War I to the eve of the Great Depression.

Time Frame

One or two class periods.

Student Objectives

To interpret primary sources from the 1920s.

To connect school programs to broader cultural debates.

To define and problematize the notion of the "tribal twenties."

To describe cultural pluralism as a precursor to multiculturalism.

Procedures

1. **Opening question:** How did Americans respond to cultural diversity in the 1920s? Introduce students to the range of responses to immigrant groups and racial minorities in the decade. Remind them that immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, who were sometimes considered as distinct racial categories, often encountered prejudice and discrimination. Review the extent of antiblack discrimination in the era, widespread suspicion of Jews and Catholics, and regional hostilities towards Mexican, Chinese, and Japanese immigrants. Discuss as well the native-born Americans who welcomed diversity and promoted pluralist ideas.

2. **Document analysis:** Distribute the selections from pamphlet by Rachel Davis DuBois, *A Program in Education for World Mindedness* (See pp. 43-46). Explain that this pamphlet describes a series of assembly programs given at Woodbury High School in New Jersey during the 1926-1927 school year. Note that it was printed and distributed by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

3. Divide students into small groups of four to five students. Each group considers one program:

October, on Italians;

November, on American Indians and the British Isles;

December, on Germans;

February, on the Negro;

March, on the Hebrews;

April, on the Orient.

4. Each group should examine its program and answer the following three questions:

a. What took place at this assembly program?

b. What information about this cultural group did students encounter?

c. Who participated in these programs?

d. Each group then describes its program and reports its observations to the entire class.

5. **Class discussion:** Discuss the document with the class as a whole.

The following questions are designed to encourage critical analysis:

a. Why were these groups chosen in particular?

b. What prejudices existed against these groups?

c. What messages do these programs communicate?

d. How might this program have affected the students who participated?

e. How has the terminology used to describe these groups changed over time?

f. Did all of the groups presented encounter similar levels of prejudice and discrimination?

g. What elements are missing from these programs?

h. How might students have responded to programs about their own cultural groups?

i. To what extent do you think that knowledge of a group's achievements eliminates prejudice?

j. What do these programs tell us about understandings of race in the 1920s?

k. How is it significant that this pamphlet was distributed by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom?

6. **Writing exercise:** Imagine that you are a student at Woodbury High School in 1926-1927. At the end of the school year, a teacher asks you to write a paragraph that describes what you learned through the assembly series and how your views have changed. What would you say?

7. **Conclusion:** Encourage students to consider how this document modifies standard portrayals of the "tribal twenties." How do we reconcile this expression of cultural pluralism with the racism and anti-immigrant sentiment of the era?

8. **Extension activity:** The task of analyzing high school materials might inspire students to look at their own education in a new light. Have students consider how future historians might analyze current high school assembly programs and other school activities. What do contemporary materials reveal about responses to America's cultural diversity today? What are the similarities and differences between today's multicultural education and the 1920s assembly programs?

Suggestions for Further Reading

DuBois, Rachel with Corann Okorodudu. *All This and Something More: Pioneering in Intercultural Education*. Bryn Mawr, Pa.: Dorrance, 1984.

Montalto, Nicholas V. *A History of the Intercultural Education Movement, 1924-1941*. New York: Garland, 1982.

Diana Selig is assistant professor of history at Claremont McKenna College. She is completing a book on the history of the "cultural gifts" movement in America from the 1920s to the 1940s, forthcoming from Harvard University Press in 2008.

FOREWORD

"We urge writers and teachers of the youth of our land to inculcate in their pupils an appreciation, not only of our own national virtues, but also of those of other nations and races, and an understanding with and sympathy for their glories and ideals. . . . Those charged with responsibility of teaching the young are urged and requested to study how best to educate mankind in international good-will."—(1925 Report of World Peace Committee of the American Legion as adopted.)

With all our national and international conferences on education, as well as our leading pedagogical magazines, urging teachers to "prove that the schools are stronger than armies and navies," there are many teachers throughout the land trying to put these ideals into practice in the classroom.

The following is just one of those many experiments and is offered to other High School principals and teachers in that spirit of mutual helpfulness so necessary to progress.

The following quotations, the first from one of the Faculty (not on the special committee which had charge of the programs) and the second from one of the Senior girls, give an idea of the effect of the programs in the School itself so far as can be judged at this early date.

"Consciously or unconsciously we are learning that mankind is the same all over this wide earth with the same hopes and needs; and with our increased knowledge and understanding comes sympathy and appreciation of the other fellow's accomplishment while at the same time that we learn to understand and admire, our fear and suspicion depart."

"Every one likes to go to Assembly this year. We used to try and cut, but now those of us who happen to have that period for lunch grab a sandwich and run to the auditorium."

Any school or organization, wishing to try this experiment in any part or in full (it could be adapted to Junior High Schools), is invited to correspond with the Committee which will do all it can to loan books and other material. Other racial contributions (such as the French and Spanish) have been outlined in preparation for their use another year. As will be seen from the programs, the experiment has been successful largely because of the fine co-operation between all the teachers in every department and the student body. This cannot be too strongly emphasized.

The co-operation of various organizations in Philadelphia helped greatly in securing prominent speakers, the loan of books, etc. It was our aim to present a particular contribution during the month which held a special day suited to it, such as Columbus Day, in October, for the Italian; Lincoln's Birthday, in February, for the Negro, and December, for the German Christmas songs.

RACHEL DAVIS-DUBOIS.

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A PROGRAM

IN

EDUCATION FOR WORLD MINDEDNESS

WOODBURY HIGH SCHOOL, WOODBURY, N. J.

A Series of Programs given by and for the 900 students during the morning assembly periods on two or three days a week during the school year 1926-27

MAIN SUBJECT:

"The Contribution of Various Racial Elements to our Complex American Life"

WOODBURY HIGH SCHOOL

WOODBURY, N. J.

MR. M. G. THOMAS - Superintendent

MRS. R. D. DUBOIS - Teacher in Charge

WOMEN'S INTERNATIONAL LEAGUE FOR PEACE AND FREEDOM

20-S-12th St., Philadelphia, Pa.

79 Halsey St., Newark, N. J.

Selections from a pamphlet created by Rachel Davis DuBois for her intercultural education program in the 1920s. (Pamphlet courtesy of the Immigration History Research Center, <<http://ihrc.unm.edu>>.)

PROGRAM FOR OCTOBER

Contribution of the Italians to Our Complex American Life.

I. Influence of Ancient Rome.

Influence of Latin on the English Language. On Law and Government. Our present Calendar. Influence of Roman mythology on Shakespeare. Talks by costumed speakers—scene, a Roman Forum.

Latin Dept.

II. Italian Art.

Costumed speakers at right and left of platform. Central tableau—characters of the Italian Renaissance: the Doge of Venice, Duke of Milan, Beatrice D'Este, Lorenzo de Medici, etc.
Speech: "Italy, the Source of Arts and Crafts (Architecture, Venetian glass, mosaics, etc.)."

Art Dept.

III. Italian Literature.

Original sketch, Chaucer's Canterbury Tales.

English Dept.

Prologue by a Herald showing their Italian background. At rise of curtain Pilgrims shown on journey in costume reciting tales.

IV. Columbus Day. Special speaker.

V. Science.

Demonstrations showing Galileo's experiments with falling bodies and the pendulum. Volta's discovery of the simple cell. Speeches on their life history.

Science Dept.

VI. History.

Why the Italians came to America. History of Immigration. Effects of the 1924 Immigration Laws. Chart Talk. (Bar Graph supplied by Y. W. C. A. International Institute, 20 S. 15th St., Philadelphia.)

History Dept.

"Why My Father Came to America," by a student of Italian parentage.

Important Names:

Educators—Madame Montessori; Angelo Patri.
World Liberators—Garibaldi; Mazzini; Count Cavour.

VII. Italian Folk Dancing.

The folk dances of almost every nationality may be seen in our American cities as the children renew the experience of their racial past. An Italian Folk Dance was given by some of the Physical Training students.

Phys. Tr. Dept.

VIII. Music.

Speech: "The Italian Contribution in the Realm of Music." Italian, the original language of music. Church music. Italian opera, etc.

Music Dept.

Lives of Caruso and Galli-Curci.

Italian music records on the Electrola presented to the High School by the Parent-Teachers' Association.

Scene showing group of Italian peasants; music of "Cavalleria," sextet from "Lucia"; Italian Dance, Tarantella.

As a finale an Italian boy sang, "O Sole Mio!" to one of the dancers.

REFERENCES

Mediterranean Lands. M. I. Newbegin.
Aspects of the Italian Renaissance. Rachel A. Taylor.
Legends of Florence. C. Godfrey Leland.
Simple Italian Cookery. Antonia Isola.
The Italian Contribution to American Democracy. John H. Mariano.

PROGRAM FOR FEBRUARY*

- Contribution of the Negro to Our Complex American Life.
- I. Gift of Music.**
Glee Clubs
 "How black folk sang their sorrow songs in the land of their bondage and made this music the only American folk music."
 Speech: "Origin, Nature and Value of the Negro Spiritual."
 Several spirituals sung by the combined glee clubs.
 Vocal and piano solos of Negro composers; Coleridge, Taylor, Diton, etc.
 Victor records of famous singers; Roland Hayes, Marian Anderson, etc.
- II. Gift of Food.**
Domestic Science Dept.
 "The Southern Negroes Are the World's Best Cooks."
 1. Demonstration by several girls on the making of peanut bread (from flour sent by Prof. Carver, of Tuskegee.)
 Finished products tasted by a teacher.
 2. Talk on the Life of Dr. Carver, of Tuskegee, who discovered 180 ways to use the peanut and sweet potato, illustrated by a collection of many articles made from the peanut.
- III. Special Speaker. Lincoln's Birthday.**
- IV. Gift of Poetry.**
English Dept.
 A talk on Negro poetry from the Uncle Remus stories to Countee Cullen, illustrated by recitations from each author discussed.
 Negro humor illustrated by several jokes from the "American Aesop." (William Pickens.)
 As the speaker tells of his life and contribution, a student dressed to represent the person walks on the stage.
- V. Gift of Famous Men.** (See "Some Racial Contributions to America," Rachel Davis-DuBois.)
 a. War. Col. Chas. E. Young.
 200,000 colored soldiers in the Civil War, and 400,000 in the World War.
 b. Inventions. Jan Metzlinger invented a machine for lasting shoes.
 c. Science. Dr. D. H. Williams performed the first successful suturing operation on the human heart.
 d. Art and Music. Henry O. Tanner, of Philadelphia, famous painter of religious subjects. Roland Hayes, the tenor singer.
 e. Literature. Dr. W. E. B. DuBois, Editor of the Crisis.
 f. Education. Booker T. Washington, principal of Tuskegee
 g. Statesman. Frederick Douglass, orator and abolitionist.
 After all stand in a row, they turn and show the audience, posters on their backs showing the progress of the Negro in 60 years by means of graphs. (Armstrong Association, Phila., Pa.)

*Note—The Program for January was omitted on account of vacation and preparation for the mid-year exams.

REFERENCES

- The American Congo. Herbert E. Seligman.
 Book of American Negro Spirituals. James Weldon Johnson.
 The Negro in Our History. Carter G. Woodson.
 When Black Meets White. Hill.
 Gift of Black Folk. W. E. B. DuBois.
 The Negro Faces America. Herbert E. Seligman.
 American Aesop. (Negro Humor.) William Pickens.
 Masterpieces of Negro Eloquence. Afro-American Folk Songs. H. E. Krehbiel.
 Negro Poetry. Robert T. Kerlin.
 *Some Racial Contributions to America. Rachel Davis-DuBois.
 There Is Confusion. (None.) Jessie Fauset.
 The Soul of Black Folk. W. E. B. DuBois.
 Fire in the Flint. (None.) Walter White.
 The New Negro. Alain Locke.
 "Cane." Jean Toomer.
 Homes of the Free. Rosa B. Cooley.

*(Pamphlet for High Schools are free.) 20 S. 12th St., Philadelphia.

PROGRAM FOR MARCH

Contribution of the Hebrews to Our Complex American Life.

I. Famous Hebrews.

Two boys in front of stage related the special contribution while boys in costume paraded slowly across the back of stage.

a. Of Yesterday:

Moses; Amos and Hosea; Spinoza.

Columbus' interpreter was a Jew, and five of that race came with him.

About 7000 Hebrews fought in the American Revolution; in the Civil War about 8000 Jews fought; in the World War about 200,000 Jews of America participated.

b. Of Today:

Louis Brandeis, Supreme Court of U. S. Julius Rosenwald, philanthropist and head of great business interests.

Baruch and his championship of the farmers.

II. Hebrew Contribution to Music.

Jubal's lyre. Saul and David's harp.

"Like the Jew himself who wears the costume of every country, his music takes on the coloring of the skies beneath which it flowers."

Records showing different types of Hebrew music, from "Eili, Eili!" to Irving Berlin.

Speech on Hebrew Music. Jewish composers, violinists, etc.

III. Special Speaker: a Jewish Rabbi, on "Hebrew Ideals."

This was an inspirational talk on the value of building our lives on ideals as a bridge is built on foundation piers. He showed how we are all alike in the realm of ideals—many of our present American ideals being based upon those of the early Hebrews.

"Peace through justice and righteous conduct, the Hebrew word to the ages."

IV. Contribution of Women Immigrants. Tableaux. Civics Dept.

Scene 1. The first immigrant, Ruth.

"Thy people shall be my people," etc., to music.

Scene 2. Group of modern immigrants on improvised gang-plank, while the Statue of Liberty greets them with a speech. Mary Antin steps from the group and prophesies her future.

V. Hebrew Contribution in Art.

Story of the Graphic Sketch Club of Philadelphia (Fleisher).
By a member of the Club.

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VI. Hebrew Influence on American Theatre. Dramatic Club

Speeches and sketches showing influence of:

Impresarios, Grau and Gest.

Theatrical Managers, Schubert, Belasco, Reinhardt.

VII. Hebrew Influence on American Literature. Eng. Dept.

Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. Style influenced by Bible.

Hebrew Scriptures a part of American life from days of the Pilgrims.

Literary influence of modern Jewish writers; Mencken, of Amer. Mercury; Moses and Lewissohn, dramatic critics; Untermyer, poet.

Inscription on the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia taken from the Scriptures. The Lincoln Penny designed by a Jewish artist (Victor Brenner).

REFERENCES

Origin of the Republican Form of Government. Oscar S. Straus.

Patriotism of the American Jew. G. W. McCall.

Romance of the Jew. Rev. Samuel W. Purvis, D.D. "A Saturday Sermon."—*Phila. Evening Bulletin*, Sept. 18, 1920.

The Jew in Civilization. Ada Sterling.

The Jews in Civilization. Hilaré Belloc.

At the Foot of Sinai. Georges Clemenceau.

A Study of Spinoza. J. Martineau.

Graphic Sketch Club. See *New York Times Magazine*, May 17, 1925.

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