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The International Institute Movement and Ethnic Pluralism

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The traditional American response to immigrants has emphasized Americanization or assimilation. The doctrine of cultural pluralism made few converts until quite recently. The International Institutes, a unique group of 55 immigrant social service agencies in American industrial cities, were among the early advocates of cultural pluralism. Unlike most agencies working with immigrants, the International Institutes accepted ethnic diversity and encouraged maintenance of immigrant languages, traditions, and folk cultures.

As Americans in recent years have been rediscovering ethnicity, scholars have begun probing the experiences of various immigrant groups. Some earlier studies emphasized the nativist responses to the newcomers, or focused on immigrant contributions to American life. More recent work, however, has analyzed the social and cultural backgrounds of the immigrants, the ways in which the migration experience altered or strengthened their life and cultural patterns, and the process by which they have assimilated into the mainstream of American culture. One of the classic works on the theory of immigrant adjustment, sociologist Milton M. Gordon's Assimilation in American Life (1964), posited three ideological or conceptual models by which Americans have conceived of the assimilation process: 1) Anglo-conformity—the nativist demand that immigrants abandon their traditions and languages and conform to the dominant WASP culture; 2) the melting pot—the idea that the best elements of different ethnic cultures would be fused into a newer and stronger American ideal; and 3) cultural pluralism—the belief that ethnic groups should maintain their identities and preserve their traditions and cultures, and that such pluralism made for a healthier democratic society.

Throughout most of American history, the demand for conformity and Americanization was strong. The melting pot ideal has also been popular in the 20th century, although the only melting pot most Americans believed in was one in which immigrants were melted down into Americans. While melting-pot advocates were more sympathetic to immigrants than the Americanizers, the end result sought by both groups was the same—the assimilation of the newcomers into the mainstream. The third ideology—cultural pluralism—has only recently become popular among

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spokesmen for the "new ethnicity." But in the early 20th century this doctrine had few advocates. Nevertheless, there were some notable early efforts at promoting cultural pluralism. The philosopher Horace M. Kallen, for instance, wrote a series of influential articles in 1915 in *The Nation* advocating the preservation of immigrant languages, religions, and cultures. In a book entitled *Theories of Americanization: A Critical Study* (1920), educator Isaac B. Berkson similarly insisted on the value of the ethnic group "as a permanent asset in American life." As Gordon has noted, Berkson argued that "each ethnic group which desires to do so should be permitted to create its own communal life, preserving and developing its cultural heritage while at the same time participating effectively in the broader life of the nation as a whole." A group of immigrant social service agencies known as International Institutes, unlike most other agencies working with immigrants, accepted these pluralist ideals, especially those of Berkson, and engaged in activities and programs designed to preserve ethnic culture in the United States.2

The International Institute movement began in 1910 under sponsorship of the Young Women's Christian Association. Edith Terry Bremer, a social welfare and settlement worker, established the first institute in New York City in that year. Its purpose was to assist newly arrived and second-generation immigrant girls and women by providing English classes, recreational and club activities, and assistance in dealing with employment, housing, naturalization, and other problems. Bremer's initial experiment was soon imitated by local YWCA's in other cities, and by the early 1920's some 55 International Institutes had been established, generally in industrial cities with heavy immigrant populations such as Boston, Buffalo, Baltimore, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Philadelphia, Providence, St. Louis, Milwaukee, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Duluth, Youngstown, Toledo, Akron, Gary, Passaic, and many others. While the YWCA is usually noted for its religious and missionary orientation, it is clear that by the early 20th century the agency had awakened to the emerging women's movement and had moved beyond moral uplift to such social issues as public health, labor reform, temperance, political reform, women's suffrage, and the peace movement. The development of the International Institute movement was a reflection of the YWCA's new concern for women as women rather than as evangelical converts. For several decades the institutes remained tied to the YWCA but, for reasons to be discussed later, in the 1930's most severed this connection and merged to create a new national organization—the National Institute of Immigrant Welfare. In 1943 the agency changed its name to the American Federation of International Institutes (AFII). Another merger took place in 1959, as the AFII joined with the Common Council for American Unity to create the American Council for Nationalities Service, which still exists today.3

As founder of first International Institutes and as executive director of the independent national organization from 1934 until her retirement in 1954, Edith Terry Bremer had a shaping influence on the institute movement. Prior to beginning YWCA work in 1910, she was graduated from the University of Chicago and served as a resident at the University of Chicago Settlement and the Union Settlement in New York, a field investigator for the Chicago Juvenile Court, a researcher for the Chicago Women's Trade Union League, and a special agent for the United States Immigration Commission.4 Through her work and her writing, she established the philosophy and goals of the International Institute movement. As early as 1911, she rejected the "prevailing notion that work for immigrants must be either shaking hands on Ellis Island or making them learn English." She opposed Americanization and forced assimilation. Americanization, she wrote, stimulated fear and hate; it represented "a nationalistic and political effort to make 'assimilation' a compulsory thing."5

As the International Institute movement developed, Bremer gradually elaborated a
clearly stated policy of cultural pluralism. Her thinking was built upon respect for immigrant cultures and the worth and dignity of the individual. She rejected the “arrogant assumption that everything American was intrinsically superior to anything foreign.” In an important statement of purpose in 1923, Bremer wrote “that there is no richer material for cultural growth than that which can be saved for the foreigner out of his own inheritance.” These ideas helped to shape institute programs which sought to preserve the immigrant heritage, transmit the old culture to the second generation in America, and foster goodwill and understanding between newcomers and native-born Americans. In accepting immigrants on their own terms, Bremer and other International Institute workers became early advocates of cultural pluralism. Although each International Institute was essentially independent, the ideals set forth by Edith Terry Bremer supplied a directing influence. A creative and energetic woman, Bremer made field visits to the institutes to advise on programs, helped to organize new institutes, sponsored annual meetings of institute workers, lobbied in Congress for more humane immigration legislation, wrote many articles publicizing the immigrant cause, and coordinated institute activities through a constant stream of newsletters and policy memoranda from the national office. These policy statements alerted institute workers to new developments in immigration law, urged sensitive and humane dealings with the ethnic communities, and adhered to the ideals of cultural pluralism. Clearly, the movement had a unified direction and a central purpose over many decades. The work of the individual institutes generally conformed to the ideals articulated by Bremer. Each institute engaged in traditional social service work, as case workers went out into the immigrant neighborhoods. Some of their most important work dealt with the citizenship and naturalization problems of immigrants. Institute workers became experts in immigration and naturalization law, and they served as mediators between newcomers and various government agencies. Almost from the beginning, they went beyond the original idea of aiding foreign-born women and began working with immigrant families and immigrant communities as a whole. They paid special attention to the so-called “second generation problem”—the family disorganization which occurred when immigrant children became caught between loyalties to the old culture and the appeal of the new. And while case work was always a primary concern, the institutes also engaged in group work and community organization in immigrant neighborhoods. Unique to the institute movement was the established policy of staffing the local agencies with immigrants themselves. Familiar with immigrant languages and traditions and known in the ethnic communities, these foreign-born or second-generation institute workers generally had professional training in social work. Called “nationality workers,” they approached their tasks in the ethnic communities with a knowledge and a sensitivity virtually unobtainable for most settlement house workers. As one observer noted in 1920, these foreign-speaking and foreign-born social workers were able “to get inside the immigrant groups.” They did not accept the paternalism and nativism which prevailed in the settlements, nor did they consider Americanization a proper goal. Beyond their practical helping tasks, International Institute nationality workers saw one of their important functions as fostering cultural identity among immigrant newcomers. They developed programs to give the immigrants the skills and knowledge they needed to adjust to life in urban America, but they also sought to build consciousness and pride in the immigrant heritage. They urged the newcomers to retain their languages and traditions and folkways. At the same time, they encouraged Americans to understand immigrant customs and recognize ethnic contributions to American life. These were especially important objectives during the World War I years and after, when nativism, the Great Red Scare, and the movement
for immigration restriction intensified ruthless Americanization demands. The work of the International Institute of Gary, Indiana. typified the movement as a whole. Founded in 1919 by local YWCA women. the Gary institute began with four professionally trained nationality workers—one each for the Polish, Czech, Bulgarian, and Italian communities of the city; Greek, Serbian, and Mexican case workers were added by mid-1920’s. These nationality workers spent much of their time doing individual and family case work in the immigrant neighborhoods. During the 1920's and 1930's, the institute handled as many as 500-600 individual cases each month. Institute workers were especially helpful in handling the legal and technical problems that most immigrants faced in connection with naturalization. Nationality workers also engaged in reform politics and in some of the more traditional kinds of settlement house tasks—visiting hospitals, serving as employment agents, interceding with government agencies, translating letters, locating relatives, teaching English classes, and so on. Moreover, the Gary International Institute, like all the others, considered group work, community organization, and the sponsorship of cultural programs as exceedingly important in promoting the ideal of cultural pluralism. Building ethnic consciousness through group activities became one of the agency’s most significant tasks. The Gary institute worked closely with local ethnic churches and with local affiliates of such groups as the Polish National Alliance, the Serb National Federation, and the Croatian Catholic Union. Nationality workers went out into the community to help organize a host of local ethnic organizations: mutual aid societies, women's and children’s clubs, and dramatic, musical, athletic, and political groups. The cultural organizations were central to the institute’s mission—they had names such as the Russian Girls Balalaika Orchestra, the Serbian Dramatic Club, the Russian Independent Musical and Dramatic Club, the Croatian Tamburica Orchestra, the Sokol Singing Society, the Italian Orchestra, and so on. The institute threw open its facilities to these groups, serving as a central gathering place for organized ethnic activities. In addition, the Gary institute sponsored innumerable ethnic concerts, dances, festivals, pageants, plays, and exhibits; and the agency held lectures on the art, literature, and history of native countries, as well as foreign-language classes for the American-born children of immigrants. Through such programs, the institute sought to preserve immigrant traditions, foster a sense of ethnic consciousness, and build cultural pluralism. These were important purposes at a time when immigrants were denigrated and when demands for assimilation and cultural conformity were strong. The International Institute of Boston provides another example of cultural pluralism in immigrant social welfare. The Boston institute was founded in 1924 as a YWCA agency, although by 1935 it had become independent of the parent organization. Under the leadership of Georgia Ely, the first executive director, the Boston International Institute adhered to Edith Bremer's fundamental precept of "keeping close to the thinking of foreign communities as a whole." The Boston Institute began with Armenian, Greek, Syrian, Russian, Polish, and Italian nationality workers. A Chinese worker was added in the 1940's. As in other institutes, these nationality workers came out of the immigrant communities. They were college graduates with additional graduate training in social work. Marie Chobanian, the Armenian nationality worker, for instance, was graduated from the Central Turkey Girls College in Armenia and took graduate courses at the New York School for Social Work. Victoria Abboud, the Syrian worker, was a graduate of American College in Beirut and the Simmons College School of Social Work. The Italian nationality worker, Giovanna Talamini, was graduated from Boston University and did graduate work at the Boston University School of Social Work. The other workers had similar backgrounds and training.
The nationality workers supplied the heart of International Institute programs. In Boston, they divided their time between individual and family case work, on the one hand, and group and community work, on the other. According to annual reports of the Boston Institute, the most common case work problems handled by nationality workers consisted of technical difficulties in connection with immigration and naturalization, family conflicts between husband and wife or parents and children, legal entanglements, discrimination in employment, need for an interpreter, health problems, and educational needs.  

While they handled these individual and family needs, nationality workers also promoted group activities in the ethnic communities. The purpose of this group work was to bring people of a similar nationality together, develop leadership and a spirit of community, and stimulate ethnic pride and consciousness. Typically, Olympia Yeranian, the Armenian nationality worker, helped organize the South Boston Armenian Women's Club in 1927. This group met regularly at the institute for lectures on health, nursing, child care, cooking, civic subjects, and American and Armenian history. Significantly, the club sponsored classes in the Armenian language for Armenian children in Boston. Similarly, an Italian Girls Club met weekly at the institute to study Italian history, language, and literature. These activities, according to the Italian nationality worker, would “give the girls a feeling of pride in acknowledging the greatness of their ancestry.” The institute's Greek nationality worker helped organize an Orthodox Young People's Christian Association, which studied Greek language and history and put on plays and concerts. The South End Greek Mothers Club met at the institute monthly to read and discuss Greek literature. A Syrian Girls Club met at the institute to study Arabic, and a Syrian Mothers Club met to hear lectures in Arabic and sing Arabic songs. Beginning in 1924, a Polish Students Club met regularly to study Polish history and culture. Ukrainians gathered at the institute for folk dancing and folk singing, Finns for Finnish musical activities, Russians for Russian language classes, and Czechs for lectures on Czechoslovak history. This sort of group and community work, encouraging ethnic identity and solidarity, demonstrated the Boston Institute's adherence to the ideals of cultural pluralism. Marion Blackwell, who followed Georgia Ely as the institute's director, strongly subscribed to the pluralist position. “I believe,” Blackwell asserted in a 1938 letter to the Boston Armenian newspaper Hairenik, “it is disastrous to sever old-country traditions and ties, and I do not believe in the melting pot idea which would make all people in America of one kind.”

The most ambitious cultural event of the year for most International Institutes was the international folk festival. These were major undertakings involving the efforts of people from many different nationality communities and requiring months of planning and organization. The International Institute of St. Paul, Minnesota, became nationally known for its International Folk Festivals. Beginning in 1932, these three-day affairs emphasized the crafts and folk arts, songs, dances, old-country dress, and native foods of St. Paul's many immigrant communities. Alice Sickels, the institute's director and originator of the St. Paul folk festivals, envisioned these programs as more than just a kind of festival pluralism. Like Edith Bremer, Sickels rejected “the obsolete idea of Americanization that the immigrant should be emptied of all his old world ways and memories and filled up with something vaguely referred to as ‘Americanism.’” The folk festivals brought people from the ethnic communities together for work on a common project; they built a spirit of pluralism by stimulating pride in the homeland and its traditions; and they made native-born Americans aware and more appreciative of immigrant cultures. As one Polish immigrant in the Minnesota city said, “The International Institute has given the Polish people in St. Paul back their culture.” The essential message of the international folk festivals, and
of the International Institute movement generally, was that diversity rather than conformity, cooperation rather than conflict, was the essence of American democracy.19

On the national level, Edith Terry Bremer provided most of the energy and dynamism for the International Institute movement. Under her prodding in the 1920's, institute people began discussing possible separation from the YWCA. The reasons for such a split seemed logical and compelling. The YWCA had designed its program for women, but the International Institutes worked with men as well as women, and with families and whole communities. The YWCA engaged in group activities, but the institutes did case work as well. Moreover, the YWCA tended to think of immigration work in terms of melting pot and assimilationist ideas rather than the pluralism promoted by the institutes. Finally, Bremer and other institute leaders argued that the immigrant cause was simply too important to be submerged as a partial concern of a women's agency. An independent organization could consolidate proimmigrant forces on the national level, lobby for favorable congressional legislation, serve as an information clearinghouse, and perhaps secure foundation support for institute work. These arguments eventually won out, and in December 1933 Bremer and her supporters founded the National Institute of Immigrant Welfare. As noted earlier, most of the local International Institutes eventually separated from the YWCA during the 1930's and joined the new national organization.20

Essentially, the National Institute of Immigrant Welfare built upon the immigrant social service work initiated by Bremer under YWCA auspices. The national organization continued to sponsor annual conferences of institute nationality workers and aided local institutes on the technical aspects of immigration and naturalization. The agency maintained workers at the immigrant arrival stations at Ellis Island and San Francisco, making initial contacts and enabling institute nationality workers to do follow-up welfare work with the newcomers in local communities.21 Bremer and her colleagues fought to reform and humanize immigration laws, especially significant activities in the xenophobic depression years when government policy, Bremer said, "was to get as many foreigners out of the country" as possible. The International Institutes, she argued in a talk at the Boston institute in 1934, were "about the only organization that has stood up and said that the foreign-born are not dangerous."22 The International Institutes, for instance, were among the few organizations to fight government-sponsored "repatriation" of Mexicans during the Great Depression.23 During these years, efforts to promote cultural pluralism remained central to the national institute's activities, as the organization continued to foster folk festivals, folk art exhibits, musical and dramatic events, and other immigrant culture activities.

In the 1940's and after, the national organization—now renamed the American Federation of International Institutes—continued these efforts for immigrant social welfare and cultural pluralism. During World War II, the agency sought to secure fair treatment for immigrant aliens and eliminate internationality conflicts among the foreign-born. After the war, the AFII sent workers overseas and, in cooperation with agencies of the United Nations (first the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency and then the International Refugee Organization), aided in the resettlement of thousands of European displaced persons. The AFII also helped in the resettlement of Japanese-Americans who had been incarcerated during the war. Later, special assistance programs were established by local International Institutes to aid Hungarian refugees in the 1950's, Cuban refugees in the 1960's, and Vietnamese refugees in the 1970's. And during this period, the AFII continued to represent local institutes before federal immigration authorities and lobby in Congress for more liberal and more humane immigration legislation.24

In all of their work, the International Institutes upheld and championed the
immigrant cause. Rather than undermining and destroying the immigrant heritage—the pattern pursued by most agencies working with immigrants—the institutes fostered ethnic awareness, consciousness, and pride. For the institute people, Americanization as commonly practiced was a reprehensible concept and a pejorative term. Rather than urging rigorous Americanization or demanding immediate assimilation, the institutes promoted the ideals of diversity and pluralism. The institutes saw nothing wrong with providing immigrants with the tools needed for adjustment to life in the new land—thus the institute sponsorship of English classes for the foreign-born. And the institutes encouraged acquisition of citizenship, especially in the 1930's as government agencies began cracking down on aliens. But teaching the immigrants English and helping them become citizens did not conflict with institute goals of preserving ethnic languages, cultures, and traditions. Edith Terry Bremer and her colleagues in the International Institute movement contended that cultural pluralism conformed to the highest principles of Americanism. A truly democratic society was one which tolerated and accepted those who were different, which respected individuality, and which accorded dignity to all.

The International Institutes, therefore, promoted a different kind of Americanization—one which cultivated ethnic diversity and put into practice the essential values of a democratic society. Through the decades of war, intolerance, depression, and war again, the International Institutes stood. in Bremer's words, "like lighthouses through these storms, declaring their faith in foreign people, and faithfully tending the light which showed bewildered foreigners the way of kindness, the respect for their identity and nationality which belongs to the true spirit of America." As Bremer's successor, sociologist William Bernard, noted recently, "the Institutes thought cultural pluralism was good for the immigrants and also good for America." 25 Unique social service agencies for newcomers, the 55 International Institutes were early and consistent advocates of ethnic pluralism in 20th century America.

NOTES


7 This paragraph is based on examination of Bremer materials in the YWCA Papers, the YWCA Archives, and the ACNS Papers.


12 YWCA, *Guide Posts*, New York: Woman’s Press, unpaginated pamphlet, in Boston International Institute Papers (hereafter cited as Boston I.I. Papers). no date. Since my examination of materials at the offices of the Boston International Institute, these papers have been deposited at the Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

13 Information on Boston’s nationality workers has been compiled from the Boston I.I. Papers.


15 *Boston International Beacon*, November 14, 1934.

16 Report of Italian Secretary, October-December 1931, Boston I.I. Papers.


24 This paragraph is based on examination of AFII material in the ACNS Papers and in the Edward Corsi Papers. Syracuse University (Corsi was president of the AFII during the 1940's and 1950's).