Horace Kallen in the Heartland: The Midwestern Roots of American Pluralism by Michael C. Steiner (review)

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American Jewish History, Volume 105, Numbers 1/2, January/April 2021, pp. 310-311 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/ajh.2021.0029

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The Spiritual Transformation of Jews Who Become Orthodox is unique in its efforts to capture, measure, and analyze the experience of spiritual-religious change within a specific population of the Jewish community. This seemingly unquantifiable objective is admirably met through the successful implementation of psychosocial developmental theories. The acknowledgement that the process of transformation never, in fact, ends, is striking—and the research here illuminates this process and a sense of its infinitude with clarity and surety. The work bears significantly on the study of Jewish orthodoxies and—the truest sign of its value—will fuel further research and inquiry.

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German-born and Harvard-educated American Jewish philosopher Horace Meyer Kallen is best known for introducing the influential concept of cultural pluralism in the early decades of the twentieth century, and it is a theory which continues to resonate to this day. Kallen maintained that diverse immigrants and minority groups cultivated their own social spaces and that they interacted to create an inclusive, ever-changing American overarching culture. In Horace Kallen in the Heartland, Michael C. Steiner, a professor emeritus of American Studies at California State, argues persuasively that the seven, often restless, years that Kallen spent in the Midwest, a “matrix of cultural pluralism,” played a pivotal, although often overlooked role in the development and maturation of his thought on the subject (2). In fact, Steiner maintains that Kallen’s sojourn in the Midwest (1911–1918), including his visits to Chicago and his stint at the University of Wisconsin, “ensured that Kallen’s sweeping theory reached full expression” in that region (73). Steiner asserts that it was there that the crucial finishing touches were added and that Kallen’s essential message contained a clear warning against the “forces of uniformity and tyranny” (2).

Steiner clearly admires what he refers to as the expansive vision reflected in the work of Kallen and the other thought leaders he interacted with who came into his intellectual orbit during his time in the Midwest.
He observes that they “forged a generous open-ended vision of diversity in the face of rising white racism and vicious war hysteria” and notes that Kallen often urged his own University of Wisconsin students to “embrace their ethnic heritage” (3, 107). At first, Kallen bemoaned his life in Wisconsin in what he considered a backwater compared to the East Coast, particularly Boston, where he grew up. However, he soon grew to appreciate the Midwest “region’s intellectual vitality and urban and rural diversity,” and his time there included some of the most productive years in terms of his writing (17). Kallen’s ideas served as a counterpoint to the contemporary melting pot theory made popular by English-born Jewish playwright Israel Zangwill. According to Steiner, in contrast to Kallen, Zangwill’s narrow concept “promoted the abandonment of ethnic identity in the crucible of American Culture” (85).

Kallen left the University of Wisconsin in 1918, and in 1919 he became a founding faculty member at the New School for Social Research in New York. Although his seminal ideas evolved, expanded, and occasionally waned over time, through his interaction with a cross section of public figures, including key Black intellectuals, social activists, and artists, Kallen remained a vocal champion of cultural pluralism through most of his lifetime, even up to his death at the age of ninety-two in 1974. He became a particularly active proponent after World War II, and Steiner asserts that in the late 1950s, Kallen adopted an even more generous version of pluralism than he had espoused forty years earlier. Kallen was also an early and staunch defender and prime mover of American Zionism until the 1920s. He even convinced Louis Brandeis that support of Zionism enhanced American patriotism and accusations of dual loyalties were unfounded aspersions.

Michael C. Steiner is an eloquent writer who has mastered the relevant primary and secondary sources to weave an informative, detailed, and often engaging narrative. He does a fine job of demonstrating the centrality of the Midwest to Kallen’s influential theory. Despite the relatively slim size of the volume, however, the book is often repetitive. For example, the countless number of times the word “expansive” is used becomes tiresome. Nevertheless, Steiner has provided an important new perspective on Kallen’s life and work, one that opens a wider window in which to examine the factors that influenced the creation of an intellectual paradigm that has remained influential and relevant for over a century. Moreover, he reminds us of the underlying importance of place and demonstrates that region clearly influences intellectual currents.

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