

LOUIS ADAMIC AND THE METAPHOR OF IMMIGRANT GENERATIONS

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COBISS 1.01

Louis Adamic viewed the dilemma of the second-generation immigrant as an American, rather than a narrowly ethnic problem. He saw the children of immigrants, despite their socio-economic gains and immersion in American popular culture, as overwhelmed by »feelings of inferiority.« These feelings, in turn, followed from the failure of Americans fully to embrace or recognize the contributions made by individual immigrants and ethnic groups to national life and, moreover, were the result of the dissociated individualism of both ethnic and old stock, rich and poor. The children of immigrants, who numbered approximately twenty-six million out of a total U.S. population of one hundred and thirty million in 1930, felt lost and isolated, deluded by fantasies of total self-transformation, and lacking cultural continuity or community.

Second-generation inferiority manifested itself in several basic forms, according to Adamic. The first form of inferiority that he describes in *My America* is reflected by facile, superficial, and groping Americanization:

Some of the New Americans [...] become chauvinistically patriotic; only their chauvinism has no basis in any vital feeling. It is insincere, empty, mere lip service; intended only to impress the dominant Anglo-Saxon element, with which they have to cope [...] Without realizing it, these new Americans are ready for almost any sort of shallow, ignorant nationalist or racist movement which will not directly attack the new racial strains in America; and thousands of them perhaps have no great trouble in bringing themselves to deny their parents, pose as old-stock Americans, and serve even a movement which would terrorize the immigrants and their children...

A smaller but nevertheless significant manifestation of inferiority feeling among immigrant children, according to Adamic, includes an outwardly brash or aggressive attitude and even criminal activity. Adamic acknowledges this reality but does not want to validate anti-ethnic attitudes that he knows exist in his broad readership. While conceding that some among the second generation »become loud and tough, actively anti-social,« Adamic hastens to emphasize that this »group is not so numerous as is generally imagined.« The subtext of Adamic's characterization here is that too much attention to the misconduct of immigrant children places the burden of redressing the second-generation problem exclusively on ethnic Americans themselves. For Adamic, the second-generation problem, like the »alien« problem and the »Negro« problem, was an *American* problem.

Adamic's third group, which is characterized by lethargy and alienation, is given the most attention. Many adult members of the second – generation just hang back from the main stream of life in this country; while their younger fellow New Americans, boys and girls in their teens (about twelve million of them) now – in 1938 – show dangerous signs of becoming the same kind of neutral unstimulating citizens, unless something is done about it. There is among them little aggressiveness, little spirit of any sort. Most of them hope to get along, to get by, somehow. Without a vital background, perennially oppressed by the feelings that they are outsiders and thus inferior, they will live outside the main stream of America's national life.

Those well-adjusted second-generation Americans who do not fall into any of the above categories have usually benefitted, according to Adamic, from favorable economic circumstances or, more typically, from parents who have been able to provide them with a sense of historical and cultural connection to the Old World and who have helped them to understand immigrants' essential role in the forming of modern, industrial America. Since such parents are far more the exception than the rule, Adamic further argues that the nation as a whole needs to share the responsibility of educating all Americans about its various cultural heritages. Moreover, as he asserts, »*A New Conception of America is Necessary.*«

The thousands of letters Adamic received in response to his diagnoses of the problems experienced by the children of immigrants suggest that his observations had struck a chord with Americans, but his insights on the second-generation problem are best revealed in his portraits and narratives about the lives of particular immigrant children. These narratives underscore several themes which tend to complicate the three generation model popularized by the historian Marcus Lee Hansen. One important theme is that the yearnings and frustrations of first and second generation are not essentially distinct but just expressed differently. Therefore, to emphasize the rejection or »betrayal« of children against parents overplays the psychological and/or physical distance from the previous generation such children had actually achieved. And, although immigrant children are marked in sometimes limiting or frustrating ways by their ethnicity, such characteristics are not so much inherited from the previous generations as ascribed by mainstream society. Regardless of the extent to which immigrant children identify themselves with American mainstream culture, the public world – and sometimes other immigrants – continue to see them as essentially foreign and apart from the main currents of American life. Furthermore, in many families, a sense that America has betrayed both generations is more urgent than the second generation's rejection of the first. Immigrant children project frustration onto their parents and vice-versa. What really angers immigrant children is not so much that their parents are provincial but that ultimately they themselves are as culturally isolated as their parents. Immigrant children may have more of the trappings of Americanization but they have not been liberated from feelings of impotence and provincialism.

Hansen, who helped to codify generational categories in »The Problem of the

Third Generation Immigrant« described the second-generation as »traitors« to the values of their parents, and he looked to the third generation as a source of ethnic revitalization. Although Hansen's essay has become a seminal work for immigrant historians and other scholars, especially after its republication in *Commentary* in 1952, the text was originally presented in May 1937 to the Augustana Historical Society, an organization made up largely of successfully assimilated Swedish Americans interested in preserving elements of the immigrant past. Consequently, Hansen's »The Problem of the Third Generation Immigrant« was originally more of an exhortation to his audience to reclaim ethnic roots as it was a product of empirical study about acculturation.

As a second-generation immigrant himself, Hansen appreciated the power of the assimilation drive. He understood the desire »to be away from all reminders of early environment, in an environment so different, so American, that all associates naturally assumed that he was as American as they.« Nevertheless, Hansen was highly critical of the second generation's break with ethnic culture. He focuses his sharpest criticism on the »traitors of the second generation who deliberately throw away what has been preserved in the home.« He concludes: »When they are gone all the hope will be lost and the imagination of the 19th century will have contributed nothing to the development of America but what came out of the strong muscles of a few patient plodders.« Hansen then points to the resurgence of ethnic identification in the third generation and argues that such a reconnection with the past can ultimately strengthen America's national character by sending powerful intellectual and cultural currents into the American mainstream.

The moralizing built into Hansen's thesis emphasizes the distinctions between first and second generations, but the uneasiness and hostility that existed between immigrants and children were not so clearly a »betrayal« in which the rich traditions of the past were shamelessly tossed aside by the younger generation. Even if immigrant children found their parents to be uncouth and the Old World culture an embarrassment, members of the second generation needed a link to the past in order to confirm to themselves and others how far they had come in America. Conversely, when the lives of immigrants felt stagnant, disassociated or full of unmet expectations, the Old World past embodied in parents or grandparents served as a sign of a connection to an enduring, vital tradition.

Hansen's thesis is not precise. All immigrant generations experience varying levels of engagement with America. Furthermore, many first generation immigrants exhibit both the drive to assimilate and the cultural confusion usually associated with the second generation. And, many children of immigrants experience the desire to rediscover cultural origins that mark Hansen's third generation. Indeed, it could be argued that Hansen's categories do not so much mark a pattern of Americanization that can be traced through grandparents, parents, and children as much as they reflect the cultural nostalgia of successfully assimilated immigrant children who yearn for the perceived integrity of the past, an antidote to the spiritual emptiness that accompanies material success and social »respectability.«

While generational categories often lack empirical accuracy and overdramatize differences between parents and children, they do have significant metaphorical and rhetorical power. Generational mapping has provided structure for many narratives about belonging in America. New and emerging Americans assert their sense of cultural citizenship by establishing distance from previous generations and ultimately—as the story typically goes—by reconnecting with a previously rejected ethnic culture and history. Hansen epitomizes this sense of recovery in his often-quoted statement that »what the son wishes to forget the grandson wishes to remember.«

The power of the generational model also stems from the fact that it captures not only the dilemmas experienced by immigrants and children of immigrants but by many older stock Americans. The conflicting feelings many immigrant children have about toward their parents is only a particular instance of a more generally experienced tension among the often competing demands of class, family and personal ambition. Given America's relative lack of historically stable, widely reinforced traditions and the erosion of community-level human interaction, the family assumes an enormous burden as a stage on which to project desires, frustrations and anxieties. For immigrants who encounter xenophobia and exclusion, family can be a safe haven or a scapegoat— or both.

In his novel *Grandsons* (1935) Adamic draws upon the metaphorical power of generations to evoke a need for cultural renewal in America. Furthermore, the novel diagnoses America's genealogical discontinuity. Americans lack a sense of inheritance, an organic connection to a dynamic, historically-rooted community. Adamic uses the genealogical framework of grandfathers, sons, and grandsons ultimately to suggest a new inheritance for all Americans that extends far beyond the physical and psychological confines of nuclear families. The protagonist, Peter Gale, rejects the complacent, isolating middle-class aspirations of his father and seeks to bond with another heritage of communal labor struggle embodied by his grandfather, who died during the workers' protest at Haymarket Square in Chicago in 1886.

Peter Gale is seeking authenticity and connectedness. He has served his country and been severely wounded in World War I but still has no sense of vital relationship to the United States. His monologues express his struggle for full cultural citizenship. More particularly, his account of his own family history demonstrates his need to find what he refers to as »the real thing,« a sense of permanence and belonging. For Peter, his father, Andy, and his Uncle Tony represent vital democratic commitment and materialist, status-driven Americanization, respectively. Both worked as young men in a steel mill. Tony was killed in an accident in 1917; Andy went into real estate, and put a »'Sr.' after his name, not only because he had a son with the same first name but also because he believed it made his name look more important and high-toned.« Moreover, Andy became possessed by the »American success psychology.« Andy is ashamed of his origins; he »didn't like living among Hunkies.« Of his Uncle Tony, on the other hand, Peter observes, »There was something about him in his dirty working clothes that made him look like the real thing. The scar of the cut throat as a boy

on Haymarket Square gave his face a romantic look. And he was proud of that scar! He was proud of being a worker.«

Peter's cousin Jack is the fulfillment of robust working class commitment represented by Uncle Tony and Anton Gale. When he meets Jack at a San Diego jail where his cousin is being incarcerated for »criminal syndicalism« he tells the narrator that Jack seemed terribly real. So simple and actual. He wore a cheap suit, no vest, a blue working man's shirt unbuttoned, no tie. In a way he looked every bit his twenty six years[...]but at the same time he gave the queer impression of being at once much younger and infinitely older. I've told you about my grandfather. How clearly I can visualize him in my mind: how he glows in my imagination. There are reasons for that, and I've told you some of them; but one of the main reasons probably is that – from the day I met Jack in the San Diego jail – the Anton Gale of my mind looks very much like Jack.

In the end, the protagonist's drive for the »real thing« eludes him. Peter's wish for authenticity is overpowered by the frantic emptiness of American life. Furthermore, Peter's efforts to link himself to an ethnic inheritance cannot be separated from a broader, typically American compulsion to be exceptional. The paradox of Peter's strange genealogical quest is that, rather than providing him with a sense of community, his search isolates him in the same fantasies of self-importance or materialism he sees – and by extension that Adamic sees – in other Americans.

Peter's efforts to write a novel embody his entanglement in America's rampant exceptionalism. He wants his novel to articulate the »human reality« and the revolutionary potential reflected in Americans like Jack, but he cannot finish it and hands over the project to the narrator. Desperately, Peter assumes the identity of Jack McLeish, the character in his book–in-progress modeled directly on his cousin. Of course, this assumed identity is an escape; Peter finds himself in a sanatorium near the Pennsylvania steel town where he grew up, suffering from amnesia and damaged lungs. In essence, Jack has tried to imagine the future for himself and the nation as a whole by returning to his – partly imagined – worker roots and by writing a novel of social vision.

All of the characters in *Grandsons*, even those with blood lines to the original English settlers of America, lack a firm cultural mooring. Such American types remain either desperately lonely, corrupted or they form superficial allegiances to fashionable causes. Through a variety of American types, who range from gangsters, to Babbits, to literary intellectuals, Adamic underscores how isolation and narcissism preclude human connections across class. Through Peter, Adamic observes:

... the problem of the great mob on the dumps is that they are isolated, lonely, unfunctioning, cut off from the vital forces of life, from culture or from symbols of culture and well being. And how do they solve their problems? In all sorts of ways. Nowadays some become bootleggers (Andy), others »Communists« (Beverly Boyd, Mildred Adams and her friends) who dream of the Soviet Union; a few become lawyers and brain guys for gangs

(Sam Schultz) [Andy's »brain guy«] or go a little crazy and live in fancy ...; still others take to writing books, stories, articles, and headlines.

Both Adamic's fiction and journalism suggest how American society as a whole has contributed to the alienation and degradation experienced by the second generation and beyond. *Grandsons* demonstrates the psychologically crippling effects of the American success mentality and grotesque individualism. The novel implies the need for historical continuity—a new American genealogy – reflected in a fusion of labor radicalism and ethnic heritage. In *From Many Lands* (1940), a collection of portraits of mostly ordinary immigrants and their children, Adamic illustrates how immigrant children are also oppressed by how the nation's refusal to grant them their full humanity. In some cases, ethnicity stigmatizes immigrant children more than it provides them an antidote to spiritual confusion.

In *From Many Lands*, Adamic's portrait of Eliot Steinberger illustrates the ways in which ascribed ethnicity plagues the second-generation, further complicating Hansen's »betrayal« argument. Ethnic children cannot break free or even »betray« an ethnic heritage if the society around them continues to reinforce the idea that their ethnicity is the major determinant of their identity. Through Steinberger's experience, Adamic calls attention to how some Americans are being limited by their *perceived* ethnicity, rather than having the opportunity to be part of a larger, dynamic American culture. Steinberger, the son of a highly successful German-Jewish immigrant, tells Adamic of his struggle for a sense of self distinct from his connection to his father's wealth and influence as a leading boss in the meat-packing industry. On one hand, he is fascinated by his father's work and eager to help improve efficiency; on the other hand, he finds the preoccupations of business life to be absurd: »The importance attached to meats and fats, to refrigeration. This endless worrying and scheming!« Furthermore, Adamic describes how his subject could not escape his own Jewishness. This was the case largely because of Steinberger's occasional encounters with anti-Semitism, such as the subtle social exclusion he experienced at Harvard and later as a physician. He explains to Adamic that »nearly every non-Jew draws a superficially or deeply cut line between himself and me, which underscores the fact that I am a Jew.« For Steinberger, then, ethnic identity is ascribed and limiting. Nevertheless, Steinberger sees in his Jewishness qualities that link him with all of society: »The Jew is perhaps an intensification of humanity, of its inner contradictions, its powers and weaknesses. The Jew is extreme in many ways, 'a graduate of sorrow cum laude,' and as such somewhat of an over-clear mirror of the human breed as a whole.« Steinberger's final question is one that Adamic is by implication asking himself: »What if we ceased to be primarily Jews or X-ians and become free agents, free to tackle the mysteries? ... That's the great possibility that interests me.« Through Steinberger, Adamic raises the hope that, rather than being limited by ethnic boundaries, Americans can explore and be shaped by a multiplicity of cultural influences and experiences.

Possibly the most poignant story in *From Many Lands* »A Young American with a Japanese Face« again illustrates the problem of cultural isolation in America and

specifically how such alienation cuts across generations. Furthermore, as in the Steinberger portrait, this narrative indirectly describes the barriers that stand in the way of America benefitting from its diversity; more specifically, it depicts how the son of an immigrant struggles against the sometimes explosive frustration of his father and, moreover, with an ethnic identity that is to a great extent attributed to him by others. The unnamed twenty-three-year old tells his story to Adamic in a San Francisco hotel room in May, 1940. Raised in the Bay area, the young man was a victim of his father's anger and self-contempt. Although his father had served in the Navy and had saved a number of sailors from a fire, his heroism was never recognized and this fact seems to feed his generalized anger and insecurity. The young man tells Adamic of his father's »sadism, which I imagined was mixed up somehow with his being a Japanese, an Oriental immigrant in America who was confused and ill at ease here, a victim of his own inadequacies ... I dimly recall that one day before the beginning of this unhappy period, I caught him posed before the mirror of the [barber] shop, pulling at the skin around his eyes this way and that, as if trying to straighten them, experimenting how he might look as a Caucasian.«

The narrator is sent to live in an orphanage and eventually attends college in San Francisco. He can no longer speak Japanese and has no link to that culture other than an intellectual curiosity. And yet he is continually made to feel that he is not truly an American but a »marginal man« (a term he learns in his sociology class): »I was neither here nor there; an orphan who was not an orphan, a 'Jap' who was not a 'Jap,' an American who was not really an American.« He is told by other *Nisei* (the children of Japanese immigrants) that he »was destined to make a living only if [he] clung to the Japanese element, of which I came.« The narrator, on the other hand, wants to break free from the cultural groupism and labeling he experiences at college. He organizes an International Club, which was really an »intra-American« organization designed to find common ground among various groups. Nevertheless, despite the narrator's desire to break free from ethnic and racial categories and despite the fact that he graduates at the top of his class, in the end, he faces a similar kind of frustration and cultural alienation experienced by his father. The narrator is unable to secure an »American« job and when he tries to enlist in the military, he is turned away by various recruiting officers. Both generations have been denied full cultural citizenship as Americans, segregated into roles safely available to Japanese Americans.

The story of the »Young American With a Japanese Face,« becomes, in effect, Adamic's critique of America. Many of the characterizations offered by the narrator are remarkably close to the language Adamic has used in *Grandsons, My America* and elsewhere to describe cultural rootlessness. At one point, for example, the narrator observes of the plight of the second generation, »We are all orphans psychologically, confused, cluttered up without a past, with the past of our immigrant parents, afflicted with our faces – all of which, of course, involves also America, which cluttered up with *her* own past, thinks she is still the America of a hundred or fifty years ago.«

While in *From Many Lands*, Adamic's portraits implicitly place the blame for the inferiority feelings of the second generation on the xenophobia and ignorance of the nation as a whole, his eighty-page narrative, *Alias, Mr. Nichols*, which appeared in *What's Your Name?* (1942), points to a more inwardly-rooted source for such feelings. Writing in a populist consensus-oriented national climate during the beginning of the United State's full involvement in World War II, Adamic's narrative evokes a need for intergenerational reconciliation. Mr. Nichols's story, as presented by Adamic becomes an ethnic jeremiad, in which the son of an immigrant attempts to purge himself of his feelings of resentment against the Old World past embodied by his father and to achieve peace with himself as a rightful cultural citizen of America.

The Old World father of the narrative, Nikolai Sobuchanowsky, is a universal first-generation figure, rather than the embodiment of a particular ethnic tradition. We learn that Sobuchanowsky is Lemkoe, apparently a small branch of the Ukranians. Nichols tells Adamic that »Most Lemkoes themselves are uncertain whether they are Ukranian, Pole or Lemkoe – it's all the same to them.« As a widowed mineworker and father of five children in a small Pennsylvania town, Sobuchanowsky is seen by his bosses as »'just a hunky' – all work, work, and more work.« Indeed, work and also frugality do seem to define most of his existence, but this work ethic is fueled by a desire to finance his children's college education in America. Sobuchanowsky is a readily recognizable self-sacrificing first-generation immigrant, dedicated to his children's future but unable to relate to them as individuals.

For John, his father's thick accent and awkward, ingratiating attitudes toward »Americans« are an embarrassment and a source of resentment. These feelings become particularly intense when he encounters »anti-foreign« attitudes at school: »When some of us 'foreign' pupils were not passed to the second grade [the principal] came to class and called our names, stumbling over each of them and saying things to us. Most of us were not sure what he meant. Some of the 'American' kids giggled. The principal had a lot of difficulty over my name and made me pronounce it two or three times: *Sobuchanowsky*, *Sobuchanowsky*. My voice sounded like thunder in my ears. My mouth and throat were dry. I wanted to run away.« John then projects this humiliation onto his father: »... when I saw Dad that evening I could not look at him. I ate no supper; I went out and hid behind the fence of a vacant old house and cried. I told myself I was dumb because I was a 'foreigner', because that skinny, goofy looking guy Nick Sobuchanowsky was my old man. ...«

John attempts to run away from this constraining, embarrassing immigrant past: He changes his last name to Nichols, and when he marries a second-generation German-American, they both agree never to discuss their ethnic origins. John's flight, however, leaves him with a wrenching, troubled feeling. As a college-educated teacher of American history, John is disturbed that he essentially disregards the role of immigration in America and perpetuates the myth that all Americans have the same culturally-specific heritage: »I asked a question and a student used the phrase 'our forefathers'. He was quoting from the chapter in our textbook on the founding of the

Republic. The boy's name is Italian and if I am not mistaken his parents are not even U.S. citizens. This struck me as ridiculous and I thought to myself, 'Our forefathers – nonsense!'

Although Adamic presents John's story as an »as told to« narrative, it is clear that he is orchestrating a morality tale about the difficult psychological need to maintain a link to the past as one moves forward in American public life. Adamic does not provide an easy solution for John's dilemma, but he does imply the value of the third-generation return as a way to ease the cultural dislocation of the second generation. Nichols's daughter, Barbara, is intrigued by her grandfather and, moreover, her immigrant heritage; in fact, she inspires an awkward reunion between father and son and goes so far as to have her name changed to Barbara Sobuchanowsky Nichols. And, when John completes his Ph.D. and takes a teaching job in the West, Nickolai moves with them and lives nearby. John remains plagued by feelings of self-consciousness about his father and avoids being seen with him, but he nevertheless asserts that he is »beginning to inch into daylight.«

The literary scholar Werner Sollors has observed how ethnic narratives often dramatize the contrition of the second-generation for its unwarranted wholesale dismissal of immigrant culture »with the suggestion that they have reformed their erroneous second generation ways in rebirth of a third generation.« In *Alias, Mr. Nichols*, Barbara embodies this third-generation renaissance. Through this narrative Adamic suggests, in a moving though rather didactic fashion, the psychological trauma arising from a too-quick shedding off of the past. Moreover, *Alias, Mr. Nichols* suggests the possibility for all generations to reintegrate Old World and New and move forward into a more dynamic society.

What's Your Name?, in which *Alias, Mr. Nichols* appears is to some extent a retreat in tone and spirit from Adamic's tense, urgent analysis about the »Old Country Complex,« the psychological trauma that threatens to undermine the American war effort that appeared in *Two-Way Passage* (1942) or the intimately rendered narrative portraits in *From Many Lands*. *Alias, Mr. Nichols* and, indeed his pitch for »organic« name changing in *What's Your Name?* are part of his effort to rebuild America as a multiethnic but nevertheless integrated nation. The cultural dislocation of immigrant children must be overcome so that America could realize its »Third Generation« promise, a community that acknowledges its immigrant inheritance and fulfills its democratic potential.

Margaret Mead in her celebratory essay about American democracy »We are all Third Generation,« published in 1942, draws on the evocative power of generations in order to make a case for cultural rejuvenation. She argues that American identity must be based on a common sense of the future. In doing so she suggests that earlier generations have a limiting sense of American citizenship: »Father is to be outdistanced and outmoded, not because he is a strong representative of another culture, well entrenched, not because he is a weak and ineffectual attempt to imitate the new culture; he did very well in his day, but he is out of date. He, like us, was moving forward,

moving away from something symbolized by his own ancestors... He was all right because he was on the right road.

To be entitled to the inheritance of Mead's »Third Generation,« to be an American insider, is to understand the sentimental and inappropriate excess of an Old World Sensibility.

Mead then makes a case for a common American experience that outweighs ethnic differences. She asserts that a special »intimacy« engendered in Hometown, USA and the mobility that many Americans share is more important than ties to the Old World. As she observes, »Americans establish ties by finding common points on the road that they are all expected to have traveled.« The future oriented-identity of Mead's third generation also is built upon, as the above passage suggests, the association of ethnicity with a narrow understanding of America. The ideal emerging America, has moved beyond the plodding, uncouth social strivings of Old World fathers. In a sense, then, Mead is still arguing for a rejection of the past but just one made with greater sensitivity.

Adamic's America is ultimately different than Mead's because he believes America is fundamentally a multiethnic nation. »We Are All Third Generation,« evokes ethnicity and then surrenders it to a national ideal. Although we need to acknowledge our debt to our immigrant elders, ethnicity is something to overcome; it stands in the way of human and national development. Adamic, on the other hand, knew that Americans needed – whether they realized it or not – an ongoing relationship with the immigrant past. This lineage was part of a national history that had not yet been fully explored and understood. When Adamic argued throughout the 1930s and into the 1940s for »natural« as opposed to forced Americanization, he never denied the ethnic past but examined it critically. Furthermore, as his own fascination with Yugoslavia suggested, engagement with one's ethnic heritage served not merely as a way to reclaim or to fill the emptiness of American consumerism and a pervasive »success« mentality, but also as a means to revitalize cultural citizenship in the United States and globally. The problem of the second generation, then, was ultimately more than the cultural adjustment traumas of immigrant children but a symptom of America's failure to embrace the yet-to-be-realized potential of its multiethnic diversity.

POVZETEK

LOUIS ADAMIČ IN PODOBE PRISELJENSKIH GENERACIJ

Dan Shiffman

Louis Adamič je razumel dilemo druge generacije priseljencev bolj kot ameriški kot pa ozko etnični problem. Otroke priseljencev je videl, kljub njihovim socialno-ekonomskim pridobitvam in utopljenosti v splošno ameriško kulturo, kot preplavljene z »občutki manjvrednosti«. Ti občutki so bili posledica ameriške nezmožnosti prepoznati in sprejeti delež, ki so ga k ameriškemu načinu življenja prispevali posamezni priseljenci in etnične skupine, in rezultat razdruževalnega individualizma tako priseljencev kot starega rodu, bogatih in revnih. Razen tega, po Adamiču, so bili otroci priseljencev pogosto žrtve stereotipov prevladujoče kulture o etničnih izvori.

V *My America* (1938) Adamič opiše tri pomembne manifestacije manjvrednostnih občutkov med priseljenjskimi otroci. Nekateri pripadniki druge generacije površno privzamejo ameriške navade in običaje. Nekateri zabredejo v uporniške in celo kriminalne dejavnosti. Toda največja in najbolj značilna skupina druge generacije je letargična in odtujena.

Adamičeva oznaka otrok priseljencev je v nasprotju z mnenjem zgodovinarja Marcusa Leeja Hansena, ki govori o »izdajstvu« etničnega izvora druge generacije. Hansen poudarja ostre razlike med prvo generacijo, ki se oklepa kulture Starega Sveta, in drugo, ki išče izhod iz preteklosti z namenom postati čisti Američani. Adamičevi fiktivni in stvarni opisi življenja druge generacije razkrijejo, da razlike med generacijama niso tako dramatične, kot se sprva zdi. Obe generaciji pogosto ostaneta »outsiderja« v ameriškem načinu življenja. Razen tega ostane druga generacija globoko povezana s prvo generacijo, s starši, ki predstavljajo varno zavetišče in ščit pred frustracijami in strahovi.

Ne glede na netočen Hansenov generacijski model imajo generacije močno metaforično vlogo pri opisovanju značilnosti kako postati Američan, in pri oblikovanju multikulturne narodne identitete. V *Grandsons* (1935) uporabi Adamič lik priseljenjskega deda, da bi izzval potrebo po novi ameriški genealogiji, ki bi priseljenjsko dediščino in delavski aktivizem smatrala kot del ameriške zgodovine, ravno tako kot Plymouth Rock. Skozi svojega fiktivnega protagonista Adamič dokazuje potrebo po preseganju samouničevalnega individualizma v ameriškem načinu življenja. V *From Many Lands* (1940) Adamič predstavi drugo generacijo, ki se, kljub svoji izobrazbi in gmotnemu uspehu, ne more otresti omejujočih stereotipov in prikritih družbenih izključitev. V *Alias, Mr. Nichols*, pripovedi, ki jo najdemo v *What's Your Name* (1942), se je Adamič osredotočil na otrokovo lastno psihološko nezmožnost vključiti svojo lastno kulturno dediščino v svoj ameriški jaz, vključno s svojo kariero učitelja zgodovine. To nezmožnost smatra Adamič kot del širšega ameriškega problema.

Za Adamiča je bil problem druge generacije več kot stvar izdaje priseljenskih staršev; bil je simptom grotesknega ameriškega individualizma in narodove nezmožnosti sprejeti nastajajoči potencial večetnične raznolikosti.