

The Melting Pot as a God-Term

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The melting pot metaphor, which imagines the United States as a cultural and social force of assimilation, has maintained a stronghold in the ideologies surrounding immigration since the metaphor emerged at the turn of the twentieth century. However, it is important to realize that the melting pot metaphor frames immigration according to certain ideologies and identities, a rhetorical function that bears real consequences for immigrants in the United States. In this paper, I use Kenneth Burke's theory of god-terms to position the melting pot metaphor as a god-term that disguises the challenges, issues, and discriminations many immigrants endure in the United States. After describing how three interpretations of the melting pot metaphor perpetuate alternative perspectives on immigration, I advocate that individuals question, examine, and seek out meaning from the melting pot metaphor each time it is written or spoken in order to gain a greater capacity for listening and understanding in contemporary immigration discourses.

In rhetoric, every way of seeing is a way of not-seeing. Every way of speaking is a way of not-speaking. Definitions, terminologies, and metaphors highlight some qualities while leaving others in the shadows. Words, as agents of perception, identity, and action, work ideologically and rhetorically as “a *reflection* of reality ... a *selection* of reality, and ... a *deflection* of reality” (Burke, “Terministic” 45). Language harbors consequences for how people perceive the world and its realities. In the contemporary United States, this rhetorical perspective on language can illuminate how individuals perceive, deliberate, and take action on immigration. The language used to discuss immigration necessarily affects how speakers view immigration and immigrants themselves. One such consequential perception within U.S. immigration discourses centers around the *melting pot*

metaphor. The concept of the United States as a melting pot has maintained a stronghold in the ideologies surrounding immigration since the metaphor's emergence at the turn of the twentieth century. However, as a metaphor and a symbol, most contemporary scholars now think of the melting pot narrative as a national myth that idealizes the history of immigration in the United States (Smith 388). Although this idealization of history has become increasingly prevalent in anti-immigration discourses, individuals on both sides of the immigration debate still use the metaphor while not always appearing to fully recognize its implications and consequences for immigration. My analysis demonstrates that the melting pot metaphor operates as a god-term that disguises the challenges, issues, and discriminations many immigrants still endure in the United States.

An investigation into three models of the melting pot metaphor reveals that these metaphors as god-terms bear the weight of immigration ideologies that perpetuate anti-immigration discourses and prejudices.

The Theory of God-Terms

Kenneth Burke's theory of god-terms develops across three of his books: *A Grammar of Motives* (1945), *Language as Symbolic Action* (1966), and *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1969). The idea of a god-term extends Burke's theory of terministic screens, which posits that the terms individuals use work as lenses, or screens, that carry certain ideologies. To Burke, terministic screens are inevitable because "whatever terms we use, they necessarily constitute a corresponding kind of screen; and any such screen necessarily directs the attention to one field rather than another" ("Terministic" 50). God-terms, then, serve as ultimate terministic screens, as "pure abstractions" that influence individuals' perceptions, worldviews, beliefs, and even identities (Burke, "De Gourmont" 151). God-terms become all-encompassing lenses through which people continuously view the world. Such terms include "history, society, truth, ideal, good," democracy, and freedom, because these abstractions "do the work of gods" by "providing the grounds of all possibility" (Rai 66). These terms embody and embolden entire belief systems held within one single word. Per Burke, the words *become* worlds that directly influence how individuals see their realities: "In any term we can posit a world, in the sense that we can treat the world in terms of it, seeing all as emanations, near or far, of its light. Such reductions to simplicity being technically reduction to a summarizing title or 'God term,' when we confront a simplicity

we must forthwith ask ourselves what complexities are subsumed beneath it" (Burke, "Complexity" 105). God-terms, then, are constantly at work shaping how individuals see the world. Such expansive god-terms contain ideologies, beliefs, worldviews, and perspectives, and because of this, they can be analyzed from a rhetorical point of view.

It is important to note that the use of god-terms is inevitable since they are a function of language. However, a recognition of how god-terms operate in language can allow individuals to see god-terms in action and the "ulterior and perhaps ultimate motives" within them (Slater). In other words, through an awareness of the power and prevalence of god-terms in language use, "we enable ourselves to be careful about the means that are used to persuade us to certain ideologies" (Slater). Ultimately, the ability to reveal god-terms at work allows for a more critical engagement with or resistance to the ideologies inherent to them.

Three Interpretations of The Melting Pot Metaphor

As a god-term, the melting pot metaphor permeates U.S. popular culture and social imagination. Few symbols associated with U.S. American national identity have entered more deeply into the language (Gleason 20). Therefore, we must realize that the melting pot metaphor carries consequential perceptions of immigration. A preliminary search through mainstream media reveals diverse and conflicting uses of the melting pot, which supports the notion that the melting pot metaphor should be interrogated. For example, an article published online in *Slate Magazine* titled "The Melting Pot Is Broken: How Slowing Down Immigration Could Help Us Build a More

Cohesive and Humane Society” refers to the process of the melting pot as “the melting and fusing of different groups” in order to “knit America’s newcomers into our national community” (Salam). The article uses an idea of the melting pot to debate that immigration into the U.S. should be limited in order to preserve a perceived national identity. Conversely, an article from *The Economist* titled “The Melting Pot Works: Why a Nation Built on Immigration Should Remain Open to Foreign Talent” posits that “the tired, poor, huddled masses who arrive on America’s shores yearning to breathe free actually bring talent, youth and global connections.” These two examples demonstrate how the melting pot metaphor appears in different contexts and with different connotations and meanings. Most often, the symbolic melting pot romanticizes the historical and ongoing processes of social and cultural assimilation. As immigrants assimilate, so do their individual cultures, histories, identities, and so-called Old-World traditions; immigrants become absorbed by traditional U.S. American culture, the pot into which the immigrants melt. When individuals speak, write, or think of the United States as a melting pot, they concede to these certain ideologies and start to see the world through them.

Given an understanding of the melting pot metaphor as a god-term, I explore the multiple interpretations of what the ambiguous melting pot means in order to suggest its consequences for immigration ideologies. When people employ the melting pot metaphor, they most often engage with one of the three dominant perceptions of it, as explained by philosophy professor José-Antonio Orosco in *Toppling the Melting Pot: Immigration and Multiculturalism in American Pragmatism*.

Orosco characterizes these three perceptions as the Anglo-Saxon conformity model, the fusion model, and the Americanization model. A god-term framework discloses how each model changes the perspective of the melting pot metaphor and alters its implications for immigration ideologies.

The Anglo-Saxon Conformity Model

The Anglo-Saxon conformity model of the melting pot maintains that U.S. national identity comes from an ethnic and cultural core established by its first English settlers. This model represents the original interpretation of the idea of the melting pot, popularized at the beginning of the twentieth century by Israel Zangwill’s 1908 play *The Melting Pot*. At that time, the Anglo-Saxon conformity model sought to protect ethnic and cultural homogeneity in the United States against immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe and Asia. Centrally, this model attributes the features and developments of United States society, politics, economics, and culture to “some real, or imagined, version of Anglo-Saxon culture” (Orosco 6). Through this lens of the melting pot, these foundational Anglo-Saxon values subordinate the values or beliefs of immigrants. Accordingly, any culture, language, or belief system from an immigrant’s nation has no place in United States society. As such, immigrants are expected to abandon their traditional heritage in order to fully adopt United States culture. In policy, the Anglo-Saxon conformity model aims to restrict immigration according to national origin, maintaining a dominant white ethnicity in the United States. This reflects a fear that immigration might threaten United States democracy as immigrants attempt to make their cultural

group's issues public and political. In this model, all immigration "threatens the stability and future prosperity of the United States because it is composed of people from ethnic groups ... who do not share those core cultural traits and do not display a ready willingness to assimilate" (Orosco 16). In essence, the Anglo-Saxon conformity model reinforces the melting pot as a god-term by framing immigration as a national threat against the superior white culture at the core of the United States' national identity. By placing Anglo-Saxon values at the center of national identity, it not only positions those values as superior to any potential contributions from immigrants, but also regards white ethnic homogeneity as central to traditional U.S. democracy. This interpretation of the melting pot often aligns with the belief that cultural groups should remain separate from mainstream U.S. society and democracy for fear that immigrants might question or challenge the perceived values that founded the nation.

The Fusion Model

While the Anglo-Saxon conformity model views U.S. identity as stable and historically situated, the fusion model of the melting pot regards this identity as dynamic and progressive. The fusion model still contends that immigrants should leave behind their identities. However, in the process of "discarding their native identities," new immigrants, settled immigrants, and U.S. citizens alike "begin to transform themselves into members of a community unlike any other in human history" (Orosco 16). Instead of immigrants melting into an existing United States culture, the intermingling of immigrants and domestic

individuals creates an entirely new and evolving U.S. culture. The previous conception of the melting pot envisioned a process in which U.S. culture dissolved the beliefs and values of immigrants and replaced them with its own. In contrast, the fusion model expresses a United States where U.S. culture influences immigrants and immigrants influence U.S. culture. Indeed, through this reciprocal process of influence and change, both immigrants and United States citizens contribute to a renewed U.S. culture built on multicultural values. This ultimately attempts to address "the most fundamental ambiguity in the melting pot ... whether the immigrant only is changed, or whether America, the host society, is also changed by the processes of the melting pot" (Gleason 34). The fusion model of the melting pot god-term creates a lens to view immigrants as valuable contributors to a dynamic U.S. American culture at the expense of their native histories, customs, cultures, and languages. Consequently, this model of the melting pot functions rhetorically to invalidate immigrants' identities by coercing them into an assimilation process that often involves shedding their previous cultures and ways of life in exchange for an uncertain future. Although the fusion model expresses hope and possibility for the contributions of immigrants to U.S. democracy, it still seems to simplify the harsh realities and discriminatory challenges that many immigrants face as they try to root themselves in the United States.

The Americanization Model

The third interpretation of the melting pot ideal, the Americanization model, draws its own conclusion as to how immigrants can truly become U.S. Americans. Differing

notably from the fusion model in regard to U.S. culture, in the Americanization model, immigrants must “adopt an already made cultural or political standard of U.S. American identity” rather than “adding their culture to a new, and yet undefined mixture” (Orosco 18). In this way, the Americanization model seems more similar to the Anglo-Saxon conformity model. Both of these positions require immigrants to relinquish much of their identities and ties to their home countries in order to assimilate. However, the Americanization model does not emphasize racial and ethnic purity as the Anglo-Saxon conformity model does. At its core, the Americanization model of the melting pot proposes that “immigrants become U.S. Americans by pledging allegiance to its constitutional principles or acculturating themselves to values and traditions associated with U.S. American popular culture” (Orosco 18). Therefore, this model claims that the central element of the identity of the United States is not race or ethnicity, but the values initiated at the country’s founding—including democracy, liberty, freedom, justice, and the pursuit of happiness (all arguably god-terms in their own rights). Through the perspective of the Americanization model, immigrants who pledge their allegiance to the core values, traditions, and beliefs of the United States should be valued as much as all previous immigrants to the United States. Yet, as immigrants change and acculturate to new values, their ethnic identities also reshape according to the constraints of their new environment. This model of the melting pot fails to recognize those fluctuating ethnic and cultural experiences, valuing instead commitment to perceived core U.S. values.

Alternative Models

These three models of the melting pot each demonstrate how the metaphor produces immigration, culture, and national identity, thus operating as a flexible god-term for U.S. immigration debates. The intense ways that the melting pot metaphor determines perceptions of immigration make the melting pot metaphor a god-term. Even alternative metaphors serve as god-terms since they shape how people view immigration. While other metaphors for assimilation in the United States may approach immigration with more acceptance or positivity, individuals still see immigration through these abstract terms.

One notable alternative to the melting pot metaphor is the visualization of the United States as a *kaleidoscope*. A kaleidoscope embodies all of the qualities of a dynamic, ever-changing national identity while also encouraging diverse communities and ethnic groups to remain distinct and heterogeneous. Sociologists who have long monitored the melting pot debate, such as Herbert Gans, argue that “the best metaphor for America is not a melting pot but rather a kaleidoscope” because “only that image really captures the constant flux, the persistent but changing populations and cultures, that makes up the overall pattern of the nation” (39). Similarly, the *tossed salad* metaphor expresses multiculturalism as a salad with many distinct ingredients that, when mixed together, create a new and distinct whole. Against other, more static metaphors, the tossed salad metaphor “embraces change,” since “adding or removing ingredients does not ‘undo’ a salad; it only modifies the salad’s taste and texture, similar to the way America’s culture continues to evolve over time” (Jenkins). The

kaleidoscope and tossed salad metaphors often seem preferable over other metaphors, such as the tapestry or the mosaic, which do not allow for change, or the rainbow, which seems to impose hierarchical separation (Jenkins). Kaleidoscope, tossed salad, tapestry, mosaic, rainbow—“no single metaphor can perfectly describe the experience of every one of the tens of millions of immigrants who have come to the United States over the last century” (Thernstrom 47). But whether individuals prefer the melting pot or some alternative metaphor to describe assimilation processes, these symbolic abstractions still directly and notably influence how immigration is perceived.

Conclusion

Fundamentally, the melting pot metaphor frames immigration debates according to certain ideologies and identities, a persuasive function that bears real consequences for immigrants in the United States. Even alternative metaphors for assimilation manifest immigration in distinct and impactful ways. Burke’s theory of god-terms as ultimate terministic screens establishes such metaphors as ideologically bound abstractions that individuals neglect to connect to the consequential realities that make such metaphors possible. While this may be so, it is not the existence of god-terms that poses a threat. Instead, it is how people hear and use them *without question*, which masks complexity and adversity for the sake of comfort. Individuals too often use or hear the melting

pot metaphor without considering the intricacies, ideologies, and perspectives held within it. Because of this, the idea of the melting pot circulates through discourse communities, academia, and politics without as much as a question or a second thought. For the reasons expressed in this analysis, I advocate that scholars, students, and individuals start to investigate and interrogate the use of god-terms, especially the melting pot metaphor. When people are “confronted” by god-terms, they must ask themselves “what complexities are subsumed beneath” them, rather than allow such substantial abstractions to pass without recognition (Burke, “Complexity” 105). We must accept more agency in our language use by interrogating what ideologies or prejudices lie beneath the use of god-terms like the melting pot metaphor. When we hear the melting pot metaphor, we should make sure that the conversation turns to questioning and listening in order to truly understand what immigration perspectives the metaphor holds in particular contexts with particular individuals. Even if god-terms persist in language usage, we can still be cognizant of what we mean by them, and make sure to ask others what they mean by them when such terms surface in spoken or written language. Ultimately, we should hold ourselves responsible to question, examine, and seek out what the melting pot metaphor means each time it is used in order to gain a greater capacity for listening and understanding in contemporary immigration discourses.

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