book review

The Newest Americans
Integrating the great Hispanic migration

Who Are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity
By Samuel P. Huntington
Reviewed by Nathan Glazer

Samuel P. Huntington’s earlier, prescient work, The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order, shaped much of the discourse on international conflict in the post–Cold War world. Now, in Who Are We? Huntington turns his attention toward what might be termed a domestic clash of civilizations—or at least a clash of cultures.

Huntington’s central concern is that 35 years of heavy migration has established a large Hispanic population in the United States that is substantially different from earlier immigrant groups. He asserts that Hispanics are geographically more concentrated—in California, the Southwest, and Florida—than their predecessors, many living in states that border Mexico. In these enclaves, they retain many aspects of Mexican culture and assimilate into American society at a slower rate than previous ethnic groups did; Mexican-Americans have been relatively slow to become citizens, and their children continue to underperform academically. Furthermore, the large group of Hispanic immigrants who came to America from Mexico has the unique feature of emigrating to lands that were once part of their native country—and were acquired by the United States through conquest.

These attributes, Huntington argues, have combined to make Hispanics less likely to adopt American values and American culture, especially in a nation whose elites have embraced a multicultural ideology that makes assimilation ever more difficult. To Huntington, these factors suggest the possibility of a second Spanish-speaking nation within the United States that is at odds with the dominant American culture.

The American Creed
Huntington does not criticize the scale of immigration per se—at least not directly. Nor does he bemoan—again, at least not directly—the changing racial and ethnic composition of America. Instead, he argues that the values brought to America by the new wave of Hispanic immigration represent a challenge to the values established by the original Anglo-Protestant settlers as the core of America’s national identity.

That identity, Huntington believes, is based on a set of ideas—a unique American creed that people of any race or ethnicity can adopt. Yet, he writes, that creed “was the product of the distinct Anglo-Protestant culture of the founding settlers of the 17th and 18th centuries. Key elements of that culture include: the English language; Christianity; religious commitment; English concepts of the rule of law, the responsibility of rulers, and the rights of individuals; and dissenting Protestant values of individualism, the work ethic, and the belief that humans have the ability and the duty to try to create a heaven on earth.”

Despite the clear association of Huntington’s creed with Anglo-Protestants, he is careful to make it clear that he does not want to resuscitate race and ethnicity as the foundation of America’s identity; he writes that his argument is “for the importance of Anglo-Protestant language and culture to the definition of the American people and the American society.”

The debates over bilingual education and multiculturalism are evidence of a nation’s struggle to define itself in the face of a shifting population. Thus far, schools have served as the main battlefield in this potential clash of cultures. The debates over bilingual education, multicultural curricula, and textbook accounts of American history are evidence of a nation’s struggle to define itself in the face of a shifting population. However, Who Are We? does not have much direct discussion of education issues; Huntington more or less assumes the victory of a patriotism-reducing multiculturalism in the schools and worries about its consequences.
culture, not Anglo-Protestant people.” But he no longer seems to think—as he stated in a 1981 book—that a common commitment to the political values enshrined in the Constitution can serve as the basis of American identity. “People are not likely to find in political principle,” Huntington writes, “the deep emotional content provided by kith and kin, blood and belonging, culture and nationality”—an argument that, of course, comes perilously close to resurrecting race and ethnicity.

The question is, Are Mexican-American values so different from “Anglo-Protestant” values as to pose a problem? At one point, Huntington quotes a Mexican-American arguing that Hispanics are indeed different. Huntington writes, “Lionel Sosa, a successful Texas Mexican-American businessman, in 1998 hailed the emerging Hispanic middle-class professionals who look like Anglos, but whose ‘values remain quite different from an Anglo’s.’” But if we were to inquire into the nature of those values, I bet we would hear reference to family, church, community, and the like. And how different would that be from Anglo-Protestant values? It is common for ethnic groups to proclaim that their values are distinctive, just as their mothers are sui generis. But when they are asked to articulate the differences, the values and the mothers turn out to be very similar.

Talking about culture and religion is a tricky business. If we take Anglo-Protestantism as the root of American national identity, we have to consider European Catholicism, which we all consider fully assimilated into whatever the American identity may be. Huntington argues that Catholicism has been “Protestantized” in America. But then why the problem with Mexican-Americans, who are largely Catholic? At one point, Huntington notes: “Unquestionably, a most significant manifestation of assimilation is the conversion of Hispanic immigrants to evangelical Protestantism.”

But the evangelical Protestantism to which many Hispanics are attracted is deeply rooted in their distinctive homeland experience. It shows strong growth in Latin America; thus converting to evangelical Protestantism means accepting religious leaders who are far less “assimilated” than American Catholics. Catholicism opens Mexicans to the influence of the American hierarchy and American priests—in short, to the influence of American culture. Here Huntington’s commitment to the Protestant roots of American identity leads him into confusion.

In general, Huntington overestimates the place of religion—specifically Christianity, and more specifically Protestantism—in American identity today. Certainly Protestantism played a key role in shaping American values. But origins are overtaken by subsequent events, and in a changing society they do not maintain the same role they played in shaping it. Nor does the current political weight of evangelical Protestantism change the fact that our political and constitutional development has pretty much reduced religion to a private matter, even if there remain energetic efforts to make religious concerns play a larger role in public affairs. I do not see why a book asking, “Who are we?” should conclude with a chapter on the role of religion.

Huntington is right to argue that our legal and political system, and in large measure our culture, were defined by the original settlers from England, not by later immigrants. We are not quite a melting pot, but neither are we—to continue the culinary metaphor, as Huntington labels the melting pot (though it originally referred to the smelting of metals)—a salad of distinct components, each maintaining its difference, as multiculturalists would have it. Huntington proposes “tomato soup” as his culinary metaphor for U.S. culture: The immigrants have added “celery, croutons, spices, parsley, and other ingredients that enrich and diversify the taste, but which are absorbed into what remains fundamentally tomato soup.”

However, Huntington fears that we are getting much closer to the salad—and that some elements of the salad are going to concentrate in one area of the bowl, separating themselves from the rest. No one can predict how matters will turn out: We are still in the midst of the huge immigration wave that began to pick up in the 1960s, and we do not see what circumstances might lead to its diminution. That is indeed a problem. But Huntington is too alarmist in his expectations, as when he writes, “If each year a million Mexican soldiers attempted to invade the United States and more than 150,000
of them succeeded, established themselves on American territory, and the Mexican government then demanded that the United States recognize the legality of this invasion. . . .” Well, even illegal immigration is not quite like that.

Fears very similar to those Huntington expresses were raised about the Irish Catholic immigrants of the 1840s, about German immigrants, Italian immigrants, Jewish immigrants, Slavic immigrants, and so on. These fears have proved groundless. Despite Huntington’s thorough presentation of the evidence, I am not convinced that the research shows that the process of assimilation—in particular, the acquisition of language and improvements in student achievement—is proceeding any slower among second- and third-generation Mexican-Americans than it did among other immigrants from peasant and village and small-town backgrounds.

True, today’s American immigrants enter a much different cultural environment than did past waves. The celebration of diversity, acceptance of multiculturalism, and the more modest place of patriotism and nationalism all make assimilation a different, if not necessarily more difficult, process. But is the assimilatory process fatally damaged as, for instance, American schools begin to recognize minority heroes and tell the stories of past discrimination? Here it is important to remember that the changes that so concern Huntington are motivated more by the demands of African-Americans and the need to better integrate them than by concern over immigrant minorities. To date the content of American education has been more profoundly affected by the nation’s most enduring internal division than by immigrants from abroad, then or now, Hispanic or Asian.

Huntington has written a brief for a possibility. It would stand to reason that Mexican-Americans, so different from other immigrant groups, should encounter greater difficulties and pose greater problems. But matters that stand to reason have to be tested on the ground. This past Memorial Day, the New York Times published a picture of a grieving Dominican mother. Her son had been killed in Iraq, and his comrades had sent her a Dominican flag they had all signed. One assumes that the son, who was granted American citizenship posthumously, had been carrying it. Multiculturalism run amok? Perhaps. But I think that assimilation is becoming a different matter from what it was, at a time when our ideas of citizenship, patriotism, and sovereignty are all undergoing surprising changes. But I also think the capacity of America to change people, to make them Americans, is undiminished. It is simply being done in different ways, and it is making rather different Americans.

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