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# IMMIGRATION, MULTICULTURALISM, AND AMERICAN IDENTITY: A CRITIQUE OF SAMUEL HUNTINGTON

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## ABSTRACT

The late Harvard University professor of Political Science Samuel Huntington, famous for his notion of a "clash of civilizations", alleges that American national identity is threatened by multiculturalism and immigration, as transnational and subnational identities displace an essential core culture. Here I critique Huntington's construction of American national identity as a fixed Anglo-Protestant cultural core prior to the 1960s that has been deconstructed by multiculturalism and is being fragmented by the current wave of immigration from Asia and especially Latin America. I argue that cultures are not fixed entities but have always been fluid in their assimilation of, and accommodation to, diverse elements, and that the dynamism and adaptability of a social system requires the creative transformations effected by the injection of new, partially differentiated elements in order to avoid stagnation and decline. Thus immigration and multiculturalism potentially nourish and enhance a vital national identity rather than undermining it.

## KEYWORDS

Immigration. Multiculturalism. Diversity. Identity. Huntington.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Amidst all the presentations of conflicting facts, data, and "evidence" in arguments for either more or fewer restrictions on

immigration into the United States of America, I am convinced that the real driving force in the immigration debate is the question of *collective identity* – specifically, whether or not immigrants are a threat to American national identity. Until that issue is addressed, it is virtually impossible to have a reasonable and intellectually honest debate over the more pragmatic questions about immigration, such as the impact of immigration on the economy, the tax burden, overburdened social institutions, the rates of crime and disease, and maintenance of the "rule of law" in our society. Which "facts" one believes and/or emphasizes depends substantially upon one's interpretive framework, and in my estimation, the primary determinant of that interpretive framework is this issue of collective identity.

I believe the case that immigrants – and Hispanic/ Latino immigrants in particular – are a threat to American national identity is most forcefully and eloquently set forth by the late Harvard Professor of Political Science Samuel P. Huntington, whose arguments have been cited widely by advocates for immigration restrictions as giving their position academic credibility. Here I want to consider and critique some of Huntington's core arguments, taken primarily from two of his major works, *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order* (1996) and *Who are we? The challenges to America's national identity* (2004).

Huntington (1996) offers the useful analytical category of "civilizations" as a paradigm for world order. Yet, rather than regarding civilizations as one analytical category among others, Huntington (1996, p. 43) tends to reify them as if they were fixed and distinct, impermeable entities, when in fact they have historically always been fluctuating configurations of human culture, with fluid boundaries and continual evolution. He does give verbal assent to this reality, stating that:

> Civilizations have no clear-cut boundaries and no precise beginnings and endings. People can and do redefine their identities and, as a result, the composition and shapes of civilizations change over time.

Yet, many of the conclusions he draws about the "clash" of these civilizations seem to ignore this truth, particularly his

firm division between "the West and the rest" (HUNTING-TON, 1996, p. 50-55), in which he sees mainly a unidirectional influence of Western civilization upon the others he identifies, without any serious consideration of the way other civilizations have contributed to the shaping of Western civilization. Huntington (1996, p. 130) can also be critiqued for seeing the various civilizations of the world as primarily and essentially in conflict, while disregarding the prevalence of co-existence and cooperation among them historically.

Uma Narayan (2000) points out the flaws in "cultural essentialism" that draws rigid boundaries between cultures and attributes certain cultural traits exclusively to "Western" culture, while offering stereotyped contrasts with other, non-Western cultures, as Huntington (1996, p. 311) does when he states, for example, that Europe is the "*unique* source" of the ideas of "individual liberty, political democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and cultural freedom". Narayan (2000) refutes this claim, as she points out the way such sharp contrasts between "Western" and "Other" cultures were constructed in order to serve the political end of proclaiming Western superiority as a rationale for colonialism. Meanwhile, the Western nations contradicted these articulated values by engaging in "slavery, colonization, expropriation, and the denial of liberty and equality not only to the colonized but to large segments of Western subjects, including women" and simultaneously ignored "*similarities* between Western culture and many of its Others, such as hierarchical social systems, huge economic disparities between members, and the mistreatment and inequality of women" (NARAYAN, 2000, p. 83-84). She adds:

> Essentialist pictures of culture represent "cultures" as if they were natural givens, entities that existed neatly distinct and separate in the world, entirely independent of our projects of distinguishing between them. This picture tends to erase the reality that the "boundaries" between "cultures" are human constructs, […] representations that are embedded in and deployed for a variety of political ends (NARAYAN, 2000, p. 86).

In fact, Narayan (2000, p. 91) states, the values of equality and rights substantially arose out of the political struggles *against Western imperialism* rather than being inherently "Western" values.

## 2. THE "CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS" AND THE "THREATS" OF IMMIGRATION AND MULTICULTURALISM

Huntington (1996, p. 45-48) delineates seven – possibly eight – distinct civilizations: Chinese, Japanese, Hindu, Islamic, Orthodox, Western, Latin American, and possibly African. Interestingly here, while Huntington (1996, p. 42, 47) describes religion as the most important element and "central defining characteristic of civilizations" and assigns to Islam and Hindu(ism) civilizations all their own, Christianity is divided into at least three; and most of the other major religions of the world do not define any of its civilizations. In reality, his civilizational divides seem to be delineated more geographically and politically than in terms of religion, particularly when one considers that even "Western" civilization varies from Protestant to Catholic to parts of Western Europe being characterized by the virtual absence, or at least marginalization, of *any* religious commitments.

The arbitrary nature of Huntington's (1996) attempt to define Latin America as a civilization distinct from the West, even though Latin America predominantly speaks European languages and shares Christianity as the major religious influence, is of particular importance here. In the end, his separation of Latin America seems more based on economic and political considerations than cultural or civilizational. The exclusion of Latin America from Western civilization is important to Huntington's argument of a Hispanic threat to American cultural identity. In order for this threat to exist, Latinos must be sufficiently "other" as to disrupt American cultural continuity. Huntington (1996, p. 200, our emphasis) states that Westerners "increasingly fear that they are now being *invaded* [...] by migrants who [...] belong to other cultures [...] and *threaten their way of life*". He adds that many Americans see immigration as a "threat to American culture" (HUNTINGTON, 1996, p. 202-203). "While Europeans see the immigration threat as Muslim or Arab, Americans see it as both Latin American and Asian but primarily as Mexican" (HUNTINGTON, 1996, p. 203).

Huntington (1996, p. 149) asserts that Mexican culture is non-European, with an indigenous core. Yet, as Walter Mignolo points out, the very idea of "Latin America" was a political project promoted by American-born European colonial and postcolonial leaders who formed the ruling elite in this region and shaped its culture, as they sought to identify themselves with Europe, while subordinating Mestizos/as and excluding any effective participation in the formation of these societies by indigenous and African peoples (MIGNOLO, 2005, p. 57-59). Ironically, what these Creole leaders actually carved out for themselves and their countries was a marginalized identity in relation to their European ideal, as the ideological division of Europe into a "Latin" (Roman), Catholic south contrasted with a Teutonic (German and Anglo-Saxon), Protestant north resulted in a parallel ideological division of the Americas (MIGNOLO, 2005, p. 70-71, 74-79). As a result:

> "Latin" America became darker and darker in relation to the increasing discourse of White supremacy that was implemented during the last decade of the nineteenth century in the US by the ideologues of the Spanish-American War. In parallel fashion to the way Spaniards were seen by Northern Europeans (as darker skinned and mixed with Moorish blood), "Latin" America began to be perceived more and more as "Mestizo/a" that is, darker skinned. And although "Latin" American Creoles and elite Mestizos/as considered themselves White [...], from the perspective of Northern Europe and the US, to be "Latin" American was still to be not White enough. This was the waiting room for the next step, to come after World War II: "Latin" America became part of the Third World, and the Indian and the Afro population remained invisible (MIGNOLO, 2005, p. 90).

Immigration from Mexico and Latin America is one of two threats to American national identity asserted by Huntington (1996, p. 304-305). The other threat, which he sees as "more immediate and dangerous" is that of "multiculturalism", as in the late twentieth century both the cultural and political definition of American national identity:

> [...] have come under concentrated and sustained onslaught from a small but influential number of intellectuals and publicists. In the name of multiculturalism they have attacked the identification of the United States with Western civilization, denied the existence of a common American culture, and promoted racial, ethnic, and other subnational cultural identities and groupings (HUNTINGTON, 1996, p. 305).

Multiculturalism, says Huntington (1996, p. 306), promotes a diversity that the "Founding Fathers" saw as a problem and a danger, as they "made the promotion of national unity their central responsibility". Here Huntington (1996) sees unity and diversity as opposites, rather than recognizing the possibility of a *unity in diversity* as one manifestation of the very individuality he proclaims to be a central feature of Western civilization.

Huntington (1996, p. 306) associates with this "onslaught" of multiculturalism affirmative action measures and other efforts to confront societal inequities based upon race, ethnicity, and sex:

> The multiculturalists also challenged a central element of the American Creed, by substituting for the rights of individuals the rights of groups, defined largely in terms of race, ethnicity, sex, and sexual preference.

He operates on a false premise here, as the alleged "group rights" are actually individual rights denied to persons on account of a marginal, non-normative group identity *imposed* upon them to render them "other" by the dominant group, white heterosexual males, who are the implied and hidden "group", not seen as a group but nonetheless forming the locus of enunciation for defining other groups and their place within American society.

Huntington (1996, p. 306-307) sees immigration and multiculturalism not only as a threat to American national identity but in starkly catastrophic terms:

> Rejection of the Creed and of Western civilization means the end of the United States of America as we have known it. It also means effectively the end of Western civilization [...]. The futures of the United States and of the West depend

upon Americans reaffirming their commitment to Western civilization. Domestically this means rejecting the divisive siren calls of multiculturalism [...].

Yet, perhaps rather than a rejection of the American Creed and founding principles, these ideals are being reinterpreted and expanded toward more consistency, striving to eliminate contradictions within them, including an actualization of the principle that "all men [supposedly understood as generically including all humans] are created equal". Perhaps this is not the *replacement* of previous culture but an *evolution* through the negotiating process of including previously excluded elements.

Huntington's (1996) flaw comes in his reification of the useful analytical category of "civilizations" into fixed entities. The Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman civilizations were multicultural (and dynamic) in their *ascendancy* and peak periods, as was classical Islamic civilization, particularly in medieval Spain. It could be argued that refusal to adapt and incorporate new elements brought down the Roman Empire. Perhaps digging in its heels to resist the encroachments of the other is itself the death knoll of a civilization.

## 3. AMERICA'S "ANGLO-PROTESTANT" CULTURE – STATIC OR DYNAMIC?

Just as he does with civilizations, so Huntington (1996, p. 206) also demonstrates an essentializing notion of one continuous, static American culture prior to its alleged disruption during the 1960s due to immigration and multiculturalism. Huntington (1996) asserts that "the central issue will remain the degree to which Hispanics are assimilated into American society as previous immigrant groups have been". Yet, this begs the question: assimilated to what? Huntington (1996) answers this question by repeatedly insisting that since the colonial period and prior to the late 20th century, America had one continuous culture that he calls "Anglo-Protestant". He states that the "American Creed" is the product of that culture and is incomprehensible and unsustainable apart from it and

that only in recent history has that culture been threatened by "multiculturalism", the celebration of diversity, transnational and subnational identities, and the threat of becoming a bilingual and bicultural society due to the pattern of immigration from Mexico since 1965 (HUNTINGTON, 2004).

In the end, Huntington proves himself to be one of James Davison Hunter's (1991) "culture warriors", drawing a line of continuity from the Puritans through American history down to today's "religious right", consistently identifying the values and commitments of "Evangelical Protestantism" and of the more conservative side of a number of "culture wars" issues with those of America's original cultural core (HUNTINGTON, 2004, especially p. 9, 27-33, 53-58, 62-66, 128-137, 142-143). For Huntington (2004) as a culture warrior, what is actually threatened by immigration and multiculturalism is not so much a unified American national identity as a national commitment to one side of the culture wars divide.

The question that arises here is: Must other identities necessarily conflict with national identity? Are not humans defined by multiple sources of identity, particularly in large, complex societies? At a point, Huntington (1996, p. 128) himself acknowledges this reality, though he gives a certain primacy to cultural identity – again, from an essentialized notion of culture. Of course, the answer to my question may depend on how national identity is defined, whether or not in ways that *do exclude* other identities. Here Huntington (2004) sheds significant light, though perhaps inadvertently. He rather nonchalantly acknowledges how American identity has been formulated historically by excluding from "the people" African slaves and Native Americans, Mexicans and Asians, so that America, as *defined by these exclusions*, "was a highly homogeneous society in terms of race, national origin, and religion" (HUNTINGTON, 2004, p. 53, 44).

Huntington's (2004) line of demarcation in the disruption of a purportedly static American culture beginning with the 1960s' advent of multiculturalism and Latino immigration may be, in effect, a racially defined dividing line. Remarkably, Huntington (2004, p. 56) again nonchalantly states: "For all practical purposes America was a white society until the mid-twentieth century". Again: "Historically white Americans have sharply distinguished themselves from Indians, blacks, Asians,

and Mexicans, and excluded them from the American community" (HUNTINGTON, 2004, p. 53). Huntington (2004) is rather cavalier in tracing this history of racial and ethnic exclusions, and he seems to assume that the culture shaped by such a history is not tainted by them, as if all that can be simply jettisoned from an otherwise perfectly good "culture", without leaving its mark and entrenched inequities and injustices.

Yet, even with these exclusions, American national identity was not nearly as unified and monolithic as Huntington (2004) supposes. Huntington (2004, p. 40) claims the original settlers recreated English culture and institutions, but in many ways, the colonists sought to *distinguish* themselves from their British origins (and not all were British – there were also Dutch, Germans, Scotch-Irish etc.). Moreover, there were substantial regional differences between the northern and southern colonies – differences that persisted through the division of the nation during the Civil War era, and arguably have persisted to this day, as reflected in the sharp blue state-red state political divisions between the northeastern and southeastern states.

Likewise, Huntington's (2004, p. 62) claim that "America was founded a Protestant society", and that "Protestant values" pervaded all aspects of American culture does not take adequate account of the extent to which the American Creed, as defined by the founding documents, was articulated *over against* a Puritan religious background and the division and bloodshed caused by religious wars in England and throughout Europe. Rather than constituting a country based on a purified and well-defined Christianity to be imposed upon all, the founders specifically incorporated the disestablishment of religion within the First Amendment to the Constitution, seeking to promote a tolerance of religious diversity, which was not at all a Puritan goal.

Huntington's (2004, p. 61) views on the assimilation of immigrants are derived from his assessment of America's cultural core as identified above:

> During the nineteenth century and until the late twentieth century, immigrants were in various ways compelled, induced, and persuaded to adhere to the central elements of the Anglo-Protestant culture [...]. If they were thought incapable of

> assimilation, like the Chinese, they were excluded [...]. Throughout American history, people who were not white Anglo-Saxon Protestants have become Americans by adopting America's Anglo-Protestant culture and political values. This benefited them and the country.

In other words, immigrants must conform to, rather than dissent from, critique, or add to a presumably fixed cultural pattern. The pattern was established by white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, and those who are "other" must give up any and all cultural "otherness". They are not to critique and expand the culture as it is defined or add their own unique perspectives but rather are to give up alterity in favor of cultural conformity. The culture does not evolve to take in diverse elements. Diverse elements are to yield up their diversity without changing the social system in any way that might take account of human difference.

Every identity, whether personal or collective, is a socially constructed identity. Every "people" – particularly in any large, complex, modern society – is a complex compendium of diverse elements. As Immanuel Wallerstein (BALIBAR; WALLERSTEIN, 1991) describes, "peoplehood" is formulated through construction and reconstruction of the "past" in accordance with contemporary social and political commitments. Though the actual past cannot be changed, historical representations of the past and interpretations of its meaning for the present – are continually reconstructed in view of present objectives (BALIBAR; WALLERSTEIN, 1991, p. 77-79). Huntington (2004), out of his own social and political commitments *vis-à-vis* the contemporary culture wars, attempts his own reconstruction of the past in American history, in order to essentialize his construction of American national identity.

## 4. WHAT IS A "CULTURE"?

I think Huntington (1996) operates from a deficient notion of what a "culture" is. Huntington (1996, p. 42) understands a culture as a collection of ideas, values, institutions,

a common language, a common religion, etc., embedded in such "key cultural elements" as blood, language, religion, and customs or way of life. I find more helpful – and more true to human cultures – the semiotic understanding of cultures as set forth by Clifford Geertz (1973, p. 3-30), seeing them instead as symbol systems that make sense and meaning out of disparate phenomena. Such symbol systems by nature must evolve to incorporate new elements and new information, fitting them into the existing order. Cultures tend to operate similarly to the way Jean Piaget described the individual's cognitive processing of information through assimilation and accommodation. As long as new information can be processed through existing categories of thought (*schemata*), it is incorporated or *assimilated* into these categories. When new information cannot be fitted into the old system of thought, the latter must be altered to *accommodate* that which does not fit (FLAVELL, 1963, p. 58-77).

Of course, as Mary Douglas (1966, p. 2-4, 35-40, 49-57, 160-164) describes in great detail, cultural systems have a conservative bias and are very resistant to change, so that for as long as is possible they will tend to deal with information that does not fit the conceptual system – that is ambiguous or anomalous and cannot be fitted into existing categories of thought – by *excluding* the anomalies as abominations, contamination, pollution, or violations of conceptual and systemically defined "order" or "purity". This explains how both immigrants and multiculturalism can be threats to the existing order, which according to Douglas' (1966) analysis is unable to process ambiguity in its definitions of that which is internal and external to the prevailing classification system.

Huntington's (2004) quest is to maintain a purported cultural purity that never really existed and is certainly incompatible with the rigorous intercultural encounters facilitated by globalization in our time period, even if immigration could be somehow be stopped and the voices of multiculturalism somehow be silenced. Huntington (2004, p. 309-316) actually directly invokes the notion of maintaining the supposed *purity* of American culture, as he describes "white nativism" as a "plausible reaction" to the "diminished role in U.S. society" of "male WASPs" and to the "perversion of their culture", in

order "to defend one's 'native' culture and identity and to maintain their purity against foreign influences". He states this "plausible reaction" in hypothetical terms, repeatedly using the conditional "would be" in his description. This is a bit disingenuous on his part, since such movements have already been around for decades and are very intimately engaged with the immigration debate. In any case, he makes it clear that what is at stake is a notion of cultural purity that is seen to be under siege.

Radcliffe-Brown (1979) makes a good point about social systems. The smaller the social system, the more there will tend to be agreement on its system of values. However, in large, complex societies such as Western nations, formed as they are of many diverse elements brought together into a *political* unity, there will be much disagreement about specific values within a pluralistic context, though smaller groups *within* those societies will be characterized by closer agreement on those same values (RADCLIFFE-BROWN, 1979, p. 50-51). Regionalization was a reality from the beginning of the United States, and a combination of increasing ethnic diversity since the late nineteenth century and the attempt to include groups that had effectively been excluded from "the people" (e.g., African-Americans, Native Americans, Mexican Americans in the Southwest, and Puerto Ricans) have rendered the United States a more complex and pluralistic society. What Huntington (2004) seems to want to do is to impose a small group unity on a large, complex society, while trying to undo the impact not only of the incorporation of excluded elements (forcing non-white persons and groups to "assimilate" to White Anglo-Saxon Protestant "culture") but of globalization, with its accelerated interaction between diverse cultures throughout the modern world. In Huntington's (2004) discourse on individual versus group identities and rights, he seems to forget that his WASP culture constitutes a group identity also, so that it is not really a contrast between individual identities and group identities but rather between one superimposed group identity and a diversity of other group identities seeking a voice alongside the one in the shaping of the social system.

Mary Douglas (1966, p. 95) points out that persons who are in marginal and transitional states, such as immigrants and

other "unassimilated" peoples, are a threat to the social order, not necessarily because they have done anything wrong but because they are "placeless" and "their status is indefinable". While their status is usually resolved ritually within religious systems, in secular contexts that ritual resolution is absent (DOUGLAS, 1966, p. 97). Victor Turner (1977, p. 95) describes both the threat and the promise inherent in the marginal status of persons in transitional states, through his description of "liminality" and liminal persons: "Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial". Liminal persons have no status and are outside the social structure. Existing on the margins of the larger society, such persons "tend to develop an intense comradeship and egalitarianism" among themselves (TURNER, 1977, p. 95), a characteristic Turner (1977, p. 96) calls "communitas". Interestingly, Turner (1977, p. 203) describes society as "a dialectical process with successive phases of structure and communitas", in which the liminal phase or persons provide a creative, prophetic, revitalizing voice and presence of anti-structure counterposed as an antithesis to the thesis of structure, which is essential to the adequate functioning of society, as liminality generates "myths, symbols, rituals, philosophical systems, and works of art", resulting in "periodic reclassifications of reality and man's relationship to society, nature, and culture" (TURNER, 1977, p. 126-129).

In other words, it would seem that injections of the "impure" are necessary to prevent a debilitating stagnation of the "pure", to afford it adaptability in an environment that confronts it with ambiguity and change. (Compare the genetic stagnation and limitations that result from inbreeding.) "What is certain is that no society can function adequately without this dialectic" (TURNER, 1977, p. 129). Both the structure of the "pure" and the anti-structure of the "impure" are essential to the survival of the society. This insight derived from Turner's (1977) observation of relatively isolated tribal cultures corresponds well with the historical reality that great advances in "civilization", far from being the outcome of the constant forward march of one biological or cultural entity, have come through the vigorous interaction and mutual interpenetration between diverse cultures and peoples.

In contrast to Turner's (1977) description and the historical record of how liminal persons inject new vitality into a society and prevent stagnation and eventual decline, Huntington argues for a static American culture as a *given* prior to the 1960s and as *desirable*, seeing disruption in the "purity" of his essentialized American culture as itself a sign of decline. For Huntington, it is not merely a question of social unity and national cohesion within American society but of a *cultural* unity to be imposed by the dominant group within that society.

Contrary to Huntington's vision, a social unity and harmony can be sought that incorporates disparate elements in a true inclusiveness rather than merely enforcing their conformity to a presumably fixed, previously existing system. This unity would be grounded in an intercultural dialogue that recognizes the limited vision inherent within any one cultural system, allowing various cultures to dialogue with, critique, and mutually transform each other, recognizing that no one culture has a monopoly on, or a perfect grasp of, truth. As Alasdair MacIntyre (2007, p. xii-xiii, 276-277) points out, all traditions of enquiry have "blind spots", unresolved conflicts, and impasses in their appropriation of truth, such that the various traditions of enquiry can question and critique each other and illuminate each other's blind spots and thereby collectively arrive toward a larger and more accurate grasp of truth than can any single tradition in isolation from the others.

Olga Consuelo Vélez Caro (2007) describes a similar process of intercultural dialogue:

> Intercultural dialogue is possible to the extent that people recognize that no culture *gives* us the truth [...] but that all cultures are ways of seeking truth and of gradually finding it (p. 251).

> This means an openness to mutual exchange and mutual transformation in a process of seeking the truth together (p. 251).

> Intercultural dialogue requires, then, the creation of conditions and spaces wherein all cultures may speak with their own voice [...] (p. 252).

> Expressed positively, intercultural dialogue means entering into a process of creative searching that takes place when the "interpretation" of both one's own reality and the "other's" reality

emerges as the result of a common, mutual interrogation, in which each voice is perceived at the same time as a possible model of interpretation (p. 253).

Intercultural dialogue and a harmonizing of diverse elements requires a genuine exchange of ideas and accommodation of a social system to embrace a larger perspective that *includes*, rather than either excluding or forcing the conformity of, disparate elements.

Such an evolutionary process within and among cultures does not, contrary to Huntington's assertions, constitute an abandonment of the pre-existing culture, though it does mean change – growth and development through the Piagetian assimilation *and accommodation* process. This is how MacIntyre (2007, p. 146) describes the growth that occurs within a "tradition", which could be posited in like manner in relation to a culture as a meaning-system tradition:

> For it is central to the conception of a tradition that the past is never something merely to be discarded, but rather that the present is intelligible only as a commentary upon and response to the past in which the past, if necessary and if possible, is corrected and transcended, yet corrected and transcended in a way that leaves the present open to being in turn corrected and transcended by some yet more adequate future point of view.

# 5. CONCLUSION

Humans have a need to construct systems of meaning, in order to give coherence to their lives and to the societies in which they live. For a society, "culture", or "civilization" to exist, there must be some *unifying* system of meaning. Intercultural encounters, migrations of people, and the blurring of cross-cultural boundaries, in the course of attempts to assimilate people and ideas from diverse cultures, generate threats to the existing meaning system and therefore provoke defensive reactions and resistance. In such a context, the presence of the "other" can be perceived as a threat. However, this presence can instead be experienced as a gift. Rather than threatening the loss or destruction of a unitary system of

meaning, the other can contribute to the *expansion* of that meaning system to incorporate new perspectives and an enhanced grasp of truth.

Indeed, "multiculturalism" and "pluralism" *can* be problematic for a cohesive society if diversity is not enfolded within a larger unity. However, a reduction of diversity to an enforced uniformity is also problematic and arguably unsustainable. Instead, there is need for some kind of "unity in diversity", a unified system of meaning that incorporates new elements without destroying individuality, particularity, and difference – a *harmony* of diverse elements that is neither discordant nor a reduction to the monotony of sameness. Such a unity in diversity would neither impose one narrowly defined system of meaning arbitrarily as "universal", nor arbitrarily assume a relativism in which all views are equally valid. All must be tested and subjected to the mutual critique of an intercultural dialogue, in search of a system of meaning (i.e., a culture) that takes due account of the diverse experiences of the whole people.

Cultural "purity" as an unchanging essence has never existed and cannot be maintained in the face of new information or disparate significata. These create cognitive dissonance, which can be relieved only through adaptation. As Douglas (1966) describes, conservative tendencies resist this and therefore try to exclude the anomalous elements as abominations (or as contaminants, disruptions, unassimilable populations to be "cleansed", barbarians, invasions, the "other" etc.) but are ultimately unsuccessful in preventing their incorporation into the system and the accommodations required for that to take place, if the social system is to survive and thrive.

Indeed, cultural evolution is always in a dialectical relationship with its past, holding onto some aspects while discarding or modifying others – certainly a messy and imperfectly accomplished process, though one that is not avoidable. As Piaget described with human cognition in general, and the same process certainly applies to human social institutions and cultures, it is not only *assimilation* of new elements into existing understandings and patterns of social organization but also *accommodation* of the meaning system to that which cannot be absorbed into it without its alteration. This has been true throughout American history, though there have been periods of low immigration and relative national

isolation. The influx of persons from Latin America will be no different. Mutual transformation will occur through the encounter.

Huntington longs for the "good old days" of a "pure" American culture before the contamination of multiculturalism. That purity itself never really existed, but in any case will not be recovered by stemming the tide of Latino immigration. It is highly unlikely that the United States will ever return to the kind of cultural isolation which might halt cultural change, no matter how restrictive an immigration policy we might choose to have, and regardless of whether multiculturalism should be abandoned as a social project. It would certainly be naïve to think that the intercultural encounters, dialogue, and transformations wrought by increasing globalization can simply be reversed or stopped. Indeed, Western Civilization itself has been shaped, enhanced, transformed, and strengthened through encounters with other peoples. The current era of globalization has intensified intercultural encounter, thus calling the views and values of *all* cultures, religions, and peoples into question – to be examined, critiqued, and even transformed by the "other", while exerting the same critique and influence *upon* the other. It is certainly a chaotic and often violent process, but the Pandora's Box of globalization has been opened, its destructive and reconstructive spirits unleashed, and the one remaining spirit in the box is hope – hope for a future in which all voices are heard, all cultures taken into account, and all peoples have a place in shaping the America and the world that are coming into being.

# IMIGRAÇÃO, MULTICULTURALISMO E IDENTIDADE AMERICANA: UMA CRÍTICA A SAMUEL HUNTINGTON

**RESUMO**

O professor emérito de Ciência Política da Universidade de Harvard Samuel Huntington, famoso por sua noção de "choque de civilizações", alega

que a identidade nacional americana está ameaçada pelo multiculturalismo e pela imigração, enquanto o deslocamento de identidades transnacionais e subnacionais é o núcleo essencial da cultura. Aqui critico a construção de Huntington sobre a identidade nacional norte-americana como um núcleo cultural anglo-protestante fixado antes da década de 1960 e que tem sido desconstruído pelo multiculturalismo e fragmentado pela atual onda de imigração da Ásia e, especialmente, da América Latina. Defendo que as culturas não são entidades fixas, mas sempre foram fluidas em sua assimilação e acomodação para diversos elementos, e que o dinamismo e a capacidade de adaptação de um sistema social requerem transformações criativas realizadas pela injeção de novos elementos e parcialmente diferenciadas, a fim de evitar a estagnação e o declínio. Assim, a imigração e o multiculturalismo potencialmente nutrem e aumentam uma identidade nacional vital, em vez de minarem-na.

## PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Imigração. Multiculturalismo. Diversidade. Identidade. Huntington.

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