

Lost in Translation

The 'good, the bad, and the ugly' in Huntington's analysis of immigration, national identity and assimilation

Book Review by Kevin Lamb

Samuel Huntington's recent book *Who Are We?: The Challenges to America's National Identity* has evoked widespread condemnation from multiculturalists and a mix of praise and criticism from conservatives. The book has been widely reviewed – in major daily newspapers, scholarly journals, blogs and e-zines on the Internet, and conservative and liberal opinion magazines. Since the reaction to this perplexing book has been so varied, it shows that the author and arguably the publisher's editors were skillfully cautious or cleverly subtle in parsing the wording of the book.

Media pundits and scribes across the political spectrum have criticized Huntington; some have rendered scathing attacks on the Harvard scholar while others have offered constructive criticism. The gist of Huntington's thesis and the reaction of his critics deserve further consideration.

'The Good'

Huntington's thesis, in essence, is that America's national identity is – at its core – an Anglo-Protestant culture, which can be traced from the early European settlements to the colonial period. He recognizes what others refer to as America's national 'creed': a set of core values and beliefs, such as the concept of liberty, equality before the law, religious tolerance, English as the primary national language, work ethic, and respect for private property that define America's core cultural

values. Huntington argues that America's core culture has survived immigration waves in the past because these immigrants have adopted this national 'creed.' However, adopting this 'creed' is only part of the story.

To his credit, Huntington makes a number of important points: He (1) recognizes the European (Anglo-Protestant) core of America's national culture; (2) draws an important distinction between "settlers" and "immigrants" (the former seek to create a new existence and constructively build a new society as residents of a community while the latter resemble transients resistant to the process of assimilation); (3) argues that America's national identity is more than just some blind adherence to a national 'creed,' but is also defined by the characteristics of

its populace; (4) points out that mass Hispanic immigration is a threat to America's Anglo-Protestant culture; (5) explains that the unity of our national culture, including the common bond of language, is jeopardized by the continued influx of unassimilable Latinos, which leads to further balkanization. Multiculturalism is a menace to America's cultural identity because it unravels the cohesive bonds of national unity.

Shortly before the book's official publication date, Huntington's serialized article appeared in the March/April 2004 issue of *Foreign Policy* ("José, Can You See?"). Critics launched a barrage of diatribes and polemical invectives at Huntington prior to the book's official pub date. *Time's* Michael Elliott, a former *Newsweek* editor, took Huntington to task for questioning the patriotism of Hispanics who reside in the U.S., and whether their continued mass migration from Latin America undermines America's Anglo/Protestant core culture. (He should read his own magazine's reporting on

**Who Are We?
The Challenge to
America's
National Identity**
by Samuel P. Huntington
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428 pages, \$27.00



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this issue!) Much of this criticism flowed from multiculturalists who viewed Huntington's book as a convincing and well-written brief against multiculturalism.

The examples below reveal the degree of hostility exhibited by these critics.

- *Newsweek's* Joseph Contreras (with Jennifer Ordonez and Arian Campo-Flores) referred to "Huntington's Hispanophobia" which "has reopened some unresolved questions about identity and integration." The article stops short of calling Huntington a "xenophobic bigot."
- Suheir Hammad, writing in *Color Lines Magazine*, comes up with alternate titles for Huntington's book: "The Hispanic Panic," "Adios Amigos" or "Selena was no Marilyn."
- Michiko Kakutani writes in *The New York Times* that Huntington "has written a crotchety, overstuffed and highly polemical book." He claims that his book, like its predecessor [*The Clash of Civilizations*], is a "considerably more shopworn volume, recycling arguments made by a wide array of earlier thinkers ... [which] is riddled with gross generalizations." The author accuses Huntington of "rehashing a lot of familiar debates about immigration... while injecting them with a bellicose new spin."
- The headline of Nicholas Von Hoffman's review in *The New York Observer* reads: "Harvard's Know-Nothing Sounds the WASP Alarm." The review states that "He has to be refuted, and repeatedly so. Such drivel."
- Jim Sleeper writing in the *Los Angeles Times* finds Huntington's book "thunderously wrong" and "so cheaply sustained.... [D]isappointingly dull...."

On the substantive issue of multiculturalism and related matters of cultural diversity, assimilation, globalization, and affirmative action, Huntington scores some solid hits. Huntington argues that the issue of multiculturalism in "...reality poses a fundamental question: Will the United States remain a country with a single national language and a core Anglo-Protestant culture?" While Huntington addresses some important issues and offers some thoughtful observations in this well-written account, it is not by any means a flawless

book.

'The Bad and the Ugly'

Arguably, Huntington's single biggest logical pitfall is an attempt to explain the problems of multiculturalism, diversity, assimilation, Western fertility rates, our Anglo-Protestant culture, etc. without recognizing the demographic significance of populations, and specifically the factors of race and ethnicity. It seems as if Huntington tries to have his cake and eat it too by offering a compelling yet *politically sanitized* critique of America's core immigration problems, which jeopardize the nation's cultural foundations, and yet identify the problem as strictly a *cultural* matter.

In other words, Huntington views the 'American

*"Will the United States remain
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Anglo-Protestant culture?"*

national experiment' as more than just 'a creed' that can be co-opted away from the majority culture. As long as the process of assimilation continues to strengthen America's *traditional* national identity, rather than undermine it with a fractionalized bi- or multicultural presence, then the nation will continue to thrive under a cohesive unified identity. However, the factor of culture that Huntington refers to seems to exist in a vacuum. Cultures simply do not exist in a vacuum. Cultures do not exist on the surface of the moon because there are no inhabitants for cultures to develop among. Populations matter when it comes to culture and cultural differences. This obvious point seems to be conspicuously missing in Huntington's analysis.

America's Anglo-Protestant culture is rooted in the European contribution to our national existence – from the puritans to the present. Another Huntington – Ellsworth Huntington, the famed Yale geologist – explained this very point in, ironically, his 1935 family history of the Huntingtons, *After Three Centuries: A Typical New England Family*. (An attempt by this author to clarify Samuel Huntington's relationship with Ellsworth Huntington failed to generate an email response.) Samuel Huntington seems oblivious to the

role of ethnicity, and to some extent nationality, since he goes out of his way to minimize any in-depth discussion of this topic. He accepts the colorblind argument that America should persist as a meritocratic nation irrespective of race or ethnicity. In this he buys into the 'melting pot' concept. But in doing so he undercuts the logical consistency that he tries to establish by emphasizing the importance of a unified national culture. If further ethnic diversity doesn't jeopardize our national core-culture then what does? (One suspects that if he pushed this envelope, Simon and Schuster would not have published his book.)

Just to emphasize this point, the prominent Harvard anthropologist Roland Dixon pointed out in his 1928 book *The Building of Cultures* that "in the origin and growth of human culture there are three primary factors involved; those, namely, of environment, of diffusion, and of nationality or race." Dixon then carefully described the factors that can balkanize nations,

[T]here is danger lest in this great experiment in national and racial blending, too large an infusion of other temperaments and ideals may occur, or that clearly undesirable ingredients may be mingled with the good. There is danger that low ideals or dangerous and subversive temperaments may be brought by defective and criminal classes, whom their mother countries are only too glad to export. Danger that such a flood of the more backward peoples should come that by their lack of vision they might, at least for some time, become a dead weight tending to hold all culture back. Or danger, lastly, that through an ever widely open door, either so vast a mass of some particular people should enter as by sheer weight of numbers to produce not a welcome enrichment of our culture, but its virtual replacement by their own, or so variegated a population should result that by the multiplicity of ideals all hope of attaining any one might be lost. In other words that too many cooks might spoil the broth. So much of sterling worth there is, so real and unquestionable an advance in culture has been made here by general adherence to the culture pattern which the early settlers brought, that no one could wish to see its future promise wrecked by dangers such as

these. To broaden and enrich that pattern slowly and wisely; to welcome gladly a large measure of varied ideals and new genius; to hold the rudder firm toward an inspiring if distant goal, would be, indeed, the part of wisdom. But to throw up the tiller, leaving all to chance, or, the journey well begun, to yield it carelessly to those with little training or seeking widely different goals, would be the part of folly.

Samuel Huntington's *Who Are We?* offers a mix of sound and slipshod reasoning that simply leaves the reader asking as many questions about America's national identity as it actually answers. •

New Article Alert

Professor John Cairns, Jr., has recently posted a new article on the website, *Ethics in Science and Environmental Politics*, titled "Coping with ecological catastrophe: crossing major thresholds," *ESEP* 2004:69-79.

"The combination of human population growth and resource depleting makes catastrophes highly probable. Catastrophes will be the result of unsustainable practices and the misuse of technology. However, avoiding ecological catastrophes will depend on the development of 'eco-ethics,' which is subject to progressive maturation, comments, and criticism. Some illustrative catastrophes have been selected to display some preliminary issues of eco-ethics."

The full text is available free of charge at: www.esep.de/articles/esep/2003/E56.pdf

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