

Samuel P. Huntington's "Who Are We?"

The Challenges to America's National Identity

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After producing a provocative and prescient analysis of the state of world politics in the post-communist era in 1996 (*The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*), in which he argued that civilisations have replaced nations and ideologies as the driving force in global politics, Harvard University political science Professor Samuel P. Huntington has delivered yet another seminal book this year.

But while *The Clash of Civilizations* tried to answer such philosophical questions as "Just where are we in history?" or "What hidden hand is controlling our destiny?" as Richard Bernstein, of the New York Times, put it, Prof. Huntington's latest book focuses not the world at large but on America alone, and tries to answer one single but crucial question: "Who are we?" The centrality of that question is such that it has become the title of this essay.

As for its subtitle, "The Challenges to America's National Identity", it is revealing of Prof. Huntington's quest, both "as a patriot and as a scholar", as he himself maintains in the Foreword, of what it means to

be an American as the 21st century is dawning and the wounds opened by the September 11th, 2001, attacks on America still hurt.

The book is doubly worth reading. Firstly, it is a good read in the sense that it gives a thorough account of the evolution of the concept of identity ever since the first English settlers set foot on American soil. Also, the description of what Prof. Huntington considers to be challenges to that American identity helps us, Europeans, to better understand the feelings and attitudes of mainstream Americans (and incidentally, if we were still in doubt, it illuminates the reasons why 51% of the popular voters decided to keep George W. Bush in the driver's seat on November 2nd, 2004).

The ingredients of American national identity ■

The subject matter of *Who Are We?* is "the changes occurring in the salience and substance of American national identity".

Salience, as Prof. Huntington states, is "the importance that Americans attribute to their national identity compared to their other many identities", while *substance* means "what Americans think that they have in common and distinguishes them from other peoples".

In Prof. Huntington's own words, "the book advances three central arguments":

- for Americans, the salience of their national identity has varied through history,
- Americans have always defined the substance of their identity in terms of race, ethnicity, ideology and culture, and
- Anglo-Protestant culture has been central to American identity for three centuries.

The author's contention is that the substance of identity is no longer defined along racial and ethnic lines, due to the emergence, in the post-WWII period, of a multiethnic and multicultural society. Ideology and culture, however, remain battlegrounds on which the fight for the preservation of a core national identity has not been lost yet.

The Founding Settlers' culture

In Prof. Huntington's view, much has been said of the late 18th century's Founding Fathers of the Republic, but little about the 17th century's settlers and their enduring legacy.

To him, America is primarily a settler society, "a colonial society, in the strict and original sense of the word 'colony', that is, a settlement created by people who leave a mother country and travel elsewhere to establish a new society on distant turf". (p.41)

Those settlers, almost exclusively hailing from the British Isles, were, culturally, in the words of D.H. Fischer, "Albion's seed". They landed on America's shores with their Anglo-Protestant culture, i.e. "the Christian religion, protestant values and moralism, a work ethic, the English language, British traditions of law, justice, and the limits of government power, and a legacy of European art, literature, philosophy and music." (p.40)

As Prof. Huntington clearly points out

Protestant beliefs, values, and assumptions... had been the core element, along with the English language, of America's settler culture, and that culture continued to pervade and shape American life, society, and thought as the proportion of Protestants declined (...). They have shaped American attitudes toward private and public policy. Most importantly, they are the primary sources of the American Creed, the ostensibly secular political principles that supplement Anglo-Protestant culture as the defining element of what it means to be American. (p. 62)

In far fewer words, "In America, the Reformation created a new society" (p.63), which does not mean, however, that American Protestantism is a carbon copy of the European one. Edmund Burke (1729-1797),

the British statesman and political thinker, was aware of that when he

Contrasted the fear, awe, duty, and reverence Englishmen felt toward political and religious authorities with "the fierce spirit of liberty" among Americans. This spirit, he argued, was rooted in the distinctively American brand of Protestantism. The Americans "are Protestants, and of that kind which is the most averse to all implicit submission of mind and opinion. All Protestantism... is a sort of dissent. But the religion most prevalent in our northern colonies is a refinement on the principle of resistance: it is the dissidence of dissent, and the Protestantism of the Protestant religion. (p.64)

Arising from the Protestant base of that "evangelical empire", as University of Chicago historian Martin Marty said of America (Huntington-p.65), is a cult of work and individualism, neatly summarised by Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790), the American statesman and philosopher, when he enjoined one to "Be industrious and FREE" (Huntington-p.71).

A 1990 International Values Survey of ten countries revealed that "87 percent of Americans reported that they took a great deal of pride in their work [while], in most countries, less than 30 percent of workers expressed that view". (p.72)

The American Protestant belief in individual responsibility gave rise to the gospel of success and the concept of the self-made man [which] came to the fore in the Jacksonian years, Henry Clay first using the phrase in a Senate debate in 1832. (p.70)

The ingrained belief in the cardinal value of work, nonetheless, leads Americans to look down on those who find it hard to work their way up "Mount Greedy", as Bill Bryson put it in *Notes on a Small Island*.

Dependence on what are often referred to as "government hand-

outs" carries a stigma unmatched in other industrialized democracies [and] "getting something for nothing" is a source of shame. (p.74)

The American Creed

Out of this, they evolved the American Creed, which, in Gunnar Myrdal's oft-quoted phrase is "the cement in the structure of this great and disparate nation".

In *The American Dilemma* (1944), Myrdal argued that Americans had "something in common, a social ethos, a political creed [founded on] the essential dignity of the individual human being, of the fundamental equality of all men, and of certain inalienable rights and freedom, justice, and a fair opportunity." (Huntington page 67)

"The sources of the Creed", Prof. Huntington claims, "include the Enlightenment ideas [which] found receptive ground in the Anglo-Protestant culture that had existed in America for over a century. Of central importance in that culture were long-standing English ideas of natural and common law, the limits of government authority, and the rights of Englishmen going back to Magna Carta." (p.68)

The Declaration of Independence, the writer asserts, embodies "the creedal definition of American identity" and

Identifying Americans with the ideology of the Creed enables Americans to claim that they have a 'civic' national identity as contrasted with the ethnic and ethno-cultural identities of other countries. (p.47)

The same Declaration, however, appealed to "Nature's God", the "Creator", the "Supreme Judge of the World", and "Divine Providence" for approval, legitimacy, and protection. (p.84)

The ensuing Constitution does not feature the concept of separation of church and state either. Indeed, Prof. Huntington claims

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Religion and society were coterminous. The prohibition of an established national religion and the gradual disestablishment of state religions promoted the growth of religion in society. (p.84)

And

In the absence of a state religion, Americans were not only free to believe as they wished but also free to create whatever religious communities and organizations they wished. (p.85)

The master of Franco-American comparative studies, Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) will conclude

In France, religion and liberty opposed each other. The Americans, in contrast, have succeeded ... in combining ... the spirit of religion and the spirit of liberty. (Huntington-p.85)

Still today, Americans are, in their overwhelming majority, a God-fearing Christian people

In three surveys between 1989 and 1996, between 84 and 88 percent of Americans said they were Christians. (p.99)

When asked in 1999 whether they believed in God or a universal spirit, or neither; 86 percent of those polled said they believed in God, 8 percent in a universal spirit, and 5 percent in neither. When asked in 2003 simply whether they believed in God or not, 92 percent said yes. (p.86)

The challenges to American national identity ■

Prof. Huntington's belief is that the bedrock Anglo-Protestant culture, which has been at the core of American identity for three hundred years, is endangered today. A host of factors participate in that attack on the long-standing mainstream culture. By and large, they fall into two main categories: quantitative ones and qualitative ones. Said differently, prominent in the first category are statistical, demographic and geographical data, while various ideologies and their attending societal consequences make up the second one.

Insecurity lies in numbers

The one menace on traditional American identity is the growing numbers of Hispanics – mainly Mexicans – that live north of the Rio Grande. But numbers are not the whole story: concentration also matters. Vivid examples are the fact that Miami has become a Cuban enclave in the past forty years or that 40% of Angelenos speak Spanish as their vernacular language. Concentration, however, is anathema to assimilation: immigrants that lump themselves together in a given area will tend to shun learning English and go on using the language of their homeland, which

threatens their integration into Prof. Huntington's America. Furthermore, considering the higher birth-rate in the Hispanic community (3, compared to about 2 for other Americans), the chance that America may become a bifurcated society, with two cultures (Anglo and Hispanic) and two tongues (English and Spanish), is growing bigger and bigger every day.

Multiculturalism, deconstructionism and all that

Since the mid-20th century, Prof. Huntington argues, the American Creed has come under increasing fire.

In the wake of deconstructionist thought, American political and governmental leaders of the 60s and 70s began to promote measures consciously designed to weaken America's cultural and creedal identity and to strengthen racial, ethnic, cultural and other sub-national identities.

Even well-meaning politicians like Presidents Kennedy and Johnson have had their grand designs for a fairer society debased and perverted by later judges and federal administrators. A good case in point would be the landmark Civil Rights Act 1964 and the ensuing Voting Rights Act 1965. Both Acts of Congress contained the germs of a better, colour-blind society, which, if rightly construed, would indeed have allowed America to get closer

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to the elusive “fundamental equality of all men” enshrined in the Creed. But judges and government officials have interpreted them in such a way that, instead of eliminating the stigma of colour, they have just reinforced it (page 148). In the process, they have given affirmative action a bad name, whereas, in its original sense of giving everyone a fair opportunity, the policy was approved of by an overwhelming majority of the American public. They have turned that lofty idea into “reverse discrimination”.

Such things have only been feasible because of a mental environment that downplayed traditional American values and identities and played up the cosmopolitan and trans-national ones. The cheerleaders and trendsetters of that revolution have been the media, Academia, the power structure in U.S. corporations, in short public and private elites.

To all of those, national identity is *passé*. High-flying business people have become citizens of the world, with no attachment to their home base, and they work for companies that disregard their national roots for fear of missing out on global markets. As that Ford spokesman quoted by Prof. Huntington said: “Ford is an Australian company in Australia, a German company in Germany, etc.”

Educationalists, academics in the vanguard, have put a premium on fragmentation rather than cohesion, stressing “gender studies”, “hyphenated-American studies” to the detriment of the classics, the study of the works of “dead white men”. As for bilingual education, Prof. Huntington asserts, instead of being a three-year transition program aiming to better integrate foreigners and allow them to be taught both in English and the language of their

homeland, it is often spread over eight-nine years and has become “monolingual education, which does not help the students”(p.165), according to former Congressman Herman Badillo in 2000, considering that the language taught is not English but (mostly) Spanish.

The danger with that “monolingual education” is “immigration without assimilation” (p.178). That threat is not specific to America: “All wealthy, industrialized countries face it”. (p.178)

In the 1990s, the realization of that menace

led a group of European scholars [Ole Waever and the “Copenhagen school”] to develop the concept of “societal security” [which] involves “the ability of a society to persist in its essential character under changing conditions and possible or actual threats”. (Huntington-p.180)

What is at stake, Prof. Huntington argues, is “the ability of a people to maintain their culture, institutions, and way of life.” (p.180)

As for recent migrants, three options are available to them. Firstly, they can choose to become “converts”, by which Prof. Huntington means fully integrated into mainstream America, staunch adherents to American values. Secondly, they can opt to become “sojourners”, that is stay in America long enough to succeed economically and return to their homeland once their pockets are lined with gold. Or they can become *ampersands* “that is, they can maintain dual residences, dual attachments, dual loyalties, and often dual citizenship in America and in their birth countries.” (p.192)

According to Prof. Huntington, the trouble with that third option, which is extremely popular with Hispanic and Caribbean migrants, is that it

is not likely to generate heartfelt commitment and devotion to America.

Prof. Huntington concludes by claiming the way “Americans define themselves determines their role in the world” while the way “the world views that role also shapes American identity” (p. 362).

In brief

three broad concepts exist of America in relation to the rest of the world. Americans can embrace the world, that is, open their country to other people and cultures [which the Professor calls the “cosmopolitan alternative”], or they can try to reshape those other peoples and cultures in terms of American values

["the imperial impulse"], or they can maintain their society and culture distinct from those of other peoples **["the national approach"]**. (p. 363)

Which alternative do Americans favour? To the author, the answer is clear

The overwhelming bulk of the American people are committed to a national alternative and to preserving and strengthening the American identity that has existed for centuries. (...) America remains America. (p. 364)

Needless to say he was proven right by the 2004 elections, which will be the subject of another article in a later issue of your favourite magazine.

S. B.

Ref: Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We?: The Challenges to America's National Identity* (New York, Simon and Chuster, 2004).

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