

Nativism dons a fancy mask, but it's still ugly

'Educated' nativism is gaining popularity, but is it good for the country?

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The Free Lance-Star, Fredericksburg, Virginia

Date published: **9/19/2004**, Viewpoints Section, pages 1 & 3

ANTI-IMMIGRATION nativism and nationalistic xenophobia are not new to the United States. Constantly shaped for centuries by the influx of immigrants the world over, this country has at the same time (and somewhat paradoxically) fostered some of the most destructive ideologies, anti-immigrant sentiments, and systems of exclusion that the world has ever seen. There are many examples of this contradictory coexistence throughout our history, some more obvious and egregious than others.

Yet immigration has not always been seen in such a negative light. For every intolerant position, one finds the consistent presence of counter positions that embrace tolerance, diversity, and pluralism, and that have interpreted immigration as a positive phenomenon. From these standpoints, immigration flows are not detrimental forces but wondrous opportunities for enhancing and enriching our culture and society.

It is the negative view of immigration, however, that has garnered much attention recently. In his widely discussed book "Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity," Samuel Huntington offers a very particular reading of the latest wave of Latino immigration and of its new forms of settlement and integration in the United States. What he sees is an impending crisis that will balkanize our country. This crisis, he believes, will be largely the responsibility of these new immigrants who just stubbornly refuse to become "American."

In constructing his argument, Huntington is highly selective with the facts he reports and the research and authors he includes. However, this makes perfect sense because what Huntington is trying to advance is a story. He is not trying to advance comprehensive research on new immigration trends and their possible implications for multiple dimensions of social life in the United States. He is not concerned about including data and studies that might point in different directions, or competing interpretations that might question his own.

So, while it is important to challenge Huntington and his supporters on the facts, it is equally important to reveal and insist that his interpretation is but one among many. We need not to construct a story about our nation and the constant incorporation of new members that is nativist, xenophobic, paranoid, and retrograde.

Cultures aren't static entities

Let me take a couple of examples to make my point.

There is no need to interpret speaking Spanish as a divisive force. The use of multiple languages will effectively widen the horizons of our culture. Why not take advantage of this linguistic practice as an opportunity to move the United States from a monolingual to a multilingual (or at least bilingual) country like many other nations around the globe?

To think that the single use of a language (English) is what keeps a nation together and a culture interconnected is, at best, simplistic. To argue that speaking an additional language (Spanish) would

rip apart this nation is to ignore central features that have always defined cultures and societies: their enormous fluidity and flexibility and their incredible capacity to change without disappearing.

Do we need to feel consumed with suspicion when two or more people are speaking Spanish in public? Are they always talking about us, or worse, making fun of us? Paranoia has never been a fruitful way of conducting social life, the business of the people, or public policy.

There are no data to support the claim that the majority of Latinos in general, or Mexican immigrants in particular, refuse to learn English if given the appropriate social and economic conditions and educational opportunities. Many decades of sociological research have documented how second- and third-generation Latinos have made English their language. The lack of English proficiency among many Latino immigrants is not an issue of resistance to the language, but one of being socialized in a Spanish-speaking context, of lacking access to formal education, and of experiencing socioeconomic inequalities.

Instead of faulting them for speaking Spanish at home and in their neighborhoods, we should be praising them for keeping their mother tongue alive (against all social and economic odds) while slowly but surely learning English and becoming bilingual. What is new today is not that Latino immigrants are stubbornly refusing to learn English, but that they are no longer willing to give up their Spanish.

Immigrants and our economy

In an increasingly globalized world, we urgently need to redefine membership to this nation. We all know what would happen if the border with Mexico were sealed off and if massive deportation were to return Latino workers to their countries of origin.

How many tons of cucumbers, sweet potatoes, strawberries, and tomatoes would rot in the fields? How many construction projects and meat-processing enterprises would grind to a halt for lack of skillful, yet inexpensive, labor?

How many restaurants would be able to remain open? How many landscapes would be overgrown with weeds? How many babies would miss their nannies? How many dirty dishes, full garbage cans, and soiled floors would remain this way (and for how long)?

We all know that the effects would be devastating. Not only regionally, but across this nation, multiple economic sectors would collapse. It is the labor provided by migrants that allows these sectors to be profitable and to weather economic downturns.

For centuries we have conceived of immigrants as aliens. Yet they have always been so important for the making of this country. How can we still consider Latino and specifically Mexican immigrants as aliens when so much economic activity is dependent on their labor?

As consumers, we all benefit from their work. Their labor keeps the costs of many products and services down; with their work they effectively subsidize many of our consumer needs.

Their contributions to the viability and prosperity of many sectors of the economy, and the benefits they provide for consumption, should be enough to reverse our exclusionary conceptions. It is time to redraw the boundaries of citizenship and membership to the United States.

Inclusion and values

What defines this nation is an old question in politics, journalism, and academia. It is a recurrent and favorite question that has baffled and entertained sporadic and established intellectuals of the public realm.

Are we and should we be an inclusive or an exclusive nation? How inclusive or restrictive should we be? Is too much inclusiveness a way of inviting progressive erosion of our central values? Is not central to our values the idea that we are an open and tolerant society?

Should we protect the values that define our national identity or trust our creative capacity to define and redefine who we want to be as a nation from one historical period to the next? Should we obligate newcomers to adopt our values and ways of life, or should we reciprocally enhance each other's values, ideas, and cultures?

The debate about immigration is less about the facts themselves and more about how to interpret historical trends and social phenomena. It's not about the number of immigrants who cross our borders and those who decide to settle within them, but about whom we want to be as a society and how we want to define our national identity. The battle, ultimately, is about meaning and interpretation.

The core values of a nation, if these exist, cannot and should not be defined by one group. Huntington and his supporters belong to a long stream of intellectuals who have had the arrogance to suggest that they alone are capable of deciding our nation's core values and what really defines us as a society.

Date published: 9/19/2004, The Free Lance-Star, Fredericksburg, Virginia