

The Americano Dream

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Samuel Huntington is one of the most eminent political scientists in the world. His essay "The Clash of Civilizations" set off an international debate, and now Huntington sees another clash of civilizations, this time within the United States.

"In this new era," he writes in his forthcoming book, "Who Are We," "the single most immediate and most serious challenge to America's traditional identity comes from the immense and continuing immigration from Latin America, especially Mexico."

These new immigrants, he argues, are not like earlier immigrants. Many have little interest in assimilating. "As their numbers increase, Mexican-Americans feel increasingly comfortable with their own culture and often contemptuous of American culture," Huntington argues.

Instead of climbing the ladder of success, he says, Mexican and other Latino immigrants are slow to learn English. They remain in overwhelmingly Hispanic neighborhoods and regions and tend not to disperse, as other groups have. Their education levels, even into the fourth generation, are far below that of other groups. They are less likely to start companies or work their way up into managerial and professional jobs.

Most important, Huntington concludes, they tend not to buy into the basic American creed, which is the bedrock of our national identity and our political culture. "There is no Americano dream," Huntington writes, "There is only the American dream created by an Anglo-Protestant society. Mexican-Americans will share in that dream and in that society only if they dream in English."

Obviously, Huntington is not pulling his punches. You can read an excerpt from the book in the new issue of Foreign Policy magazine at www.foreignpolicy.com. You'll find that Huntington marshals a body of evidence to support his claims. But the most persuasive evidence is against him. Mexican-American assimilation is a complicated topic because Mexican-Americans are such a diverse group. The educated assimilate readily; those who come from peasant villages take longer. But they are assimilating.

It's easy to find evidence that suggests this is so. In their book, "Remaking the American Mainstream," Richard Alba of SUNY-Albany and Victor Nee of Cornell point out that though there are some border neighborhoods where immigrants are slow to learn English, Mexicans nationwide know they must learn it to get ahead. By the third generation, 60 percent of Mexican-American children speak only English at home.

Nor is it true that Mexican immigrants are scuttling along the bottom of the economic ladder. An analysis of 2000 census data by the USC urban planner Dowell Myers suggests that Latinos are quite adept at climbing out of poverty. Sixty-eight percent of those who have been in this country 30 years own their own homes.

Mexican immigrants are in fact dispersing around the nation. When they have children, they tend to lose touch with their Mexican villages and sink roots here. If you look at consumer data, you find that while they may spend more money on children's clothes and less on electronics than native-born Americans, there are no significant differences between Mexican-American lifestyles and other American lifestyles. They serve in the military -- and die for this nation -- at comparable rates.

Frankly, something's a little off in Huntington's use of the term "Anglo-Protestant" to describe American culture. There is no question that we have all been shaped by the legacies of Jonathan Edwards and Benjamin Franklin. But the mentality that binds us is not well described by the words "Anglo" or "Protestant."

We are bound together because we Americans share a common conception of the future. History is not cyclical for us. Progress does not come incrementally, but can be achieved in daring leaps. That mentality bubbles out of Hispanic neighborhoods, as any visitor can see.

Huntington is right that Mexican-Americans lag at school. But that's in part because we've failed them. Our integration machinery is broken. But if we close our borders to new immigration, you can kiss goodbye the new energy, new tastes and new strivers who want to lunge into the future.

That's the real threat to the American creed.