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Mucho Grande Problema: Is That Right Mr. Huntington?

By Gustavo Cano

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In this brief piece, I would like to discuss some interesting aspects of Samuel P. Huntington's article, "The Hispanic Challenge" (Foreign Policy, March/April 2004). I will focus mostly on the Mexican side of the story, with the aim to highlight confusing statements that any serious scholar can rarely afford to make, without expecting a strong reaction from his American peers, particularly, the Latino ones.

Mr. Huntington, through his arguments about the dynamics of 17th-, 18th-, and 19th-century about the Anglo-Protestant settlement of values, institutions and culture in America, puts aside the effect on assimilation and acculturation that modern media exerts in the process. Hispanic media's broadcasting is a sound contribution to the preservation of Spanish language in many Hispanic homes in the United States.

America in the 21st century is very different from its own past: free speech has made this country one of a kind in historical terms, and the founding settlers mentioned nothing about in what language this right should be exerted.

Mr. Huntington asserts that Hispanic immigration, specifically Mexican immigration, threatens to divide the United States into two peoples, two cultures, and two languages. We all live in a global world, in which people who can afford two or more languages are highly competitive in the labor market, where people who live with one or more

extra cultures in the neighborhood learn to be tolerant, and where two or more people can live in the same nation in a mutually beneficial, long-term relationship. Yes, they can.

However, Mr. Huntington insists that Mexicans must assimilate into the Anglo-Protestant way of American life. Mr. Huntington's view, in this respect, is a short-sighted one. Surprise: Mexicans do assimilate and acculturate. I would like to invite Mr. Huntington to spend a couple of weeks with Mexican elites who currently rule the country, and tell me if they are not assimilated into the American way of life. Most of these elites (although it is fair to say that not all of them), were trained in the best U.S. universities, they speak two or more languages, they watch cable TV (in English), and they travel with relative frequency to the U.S. to do business and shopping. Some of them are currently exerting an extreme version of American neoliberal solutions to every-day problems of the average Mexican, and they promise that Mexico's future is better than ever. Others are doing good business all over the planet, without the slightest possibility of being accused of becoming a threat to the assimilation or acculturation processes of any nation.

Moreover, assimilation is not only a two way highway, but it is also a game of mirrors—just because you do not see something does not mean it does not exist. The American way of life, through all of its transnational corporations and media, has affected Mexican way of life as a whole, and in a permanent way. However, cultural core issues tend to remain in place, elite or not, third-world or not. Most Mexicans do like to drink tequila, and certainly love tacos and mariachi songs. Most Mexicans also realize that speaking English is a strong asset whenever applying for a job in Mexico.

Things do happen in an era of globalization... what is the big deal with that? Welcome to the real world, Mr. Huntington.

Mr. Huntington tends to see the Mexican/Hispanic immigration issue as a huge problem for the U.S. (Quite pessimistically, I would say.) He complains about third-world type fertility rates. He argues that white and black Americans are perilously ignoring the social and cultural consequences of Mexican/Hispanic immigration, that Mexicans feel that "they have special rights" on certain parts of U.S. territory, that the Statue of Liberty has no relevance to Mexicans, that they live regionally concentrated, that they all speak Spanish at home, that they are not good enough to become the fellow citizens of Anglo-Protestant Americans, that their offspring do not identify primarily with the U.S., that they resist assimilation at any cost, that their presence in U.S. soil provokes an acculturation in reverse, and that the melting pot is about to be choked... Too many misinformed complaints, too many adjectives. According to Mr. Huntington, Mexican/Hispanic migration is no good news to America in any way.

Mr. Huntington, please, you can do better than that. At least start by being a little bit more objective on the matter, for example, and recognize the other side of the coin. Do not only imagine what would happen if Mexican flows of immigrants stop, but think also in terms of the reasons for which one of the most competitive economies in the planet has allowed undocumented aliens--and not just Mexicans, by the way--to incorporate into the economic system with practically no complaints over the past 40 years. Think in terms of the benefits that it has represented, and do represent, to the American economy --mostly services and goods-- millions of low-wage workers that in

most cases, regardless of their migratory status, pay direct and indirect taxes, and social security fees.

Globalization is here to stay. Everyone has to pay the price in order to become competitive. No free lunch, remember? Well, let's deal with the issue from a realistic standpoint. Do not only assume that the future can be challenged, but admit that the future is already here, and that America's present is our major challenge. Let's work with what we have and let's solve problems from within. Millions of undocumented aliens need to regularize their migratory status, and many of them do want to learn English. Most of them, and their children, are excluded from a fair education system, and are systematically exploited in their work places because of their migratory status. Becoming a documented immigrant and speaking English certainly are solid steps when trying to assimilate into mainstream America society.

Finally, from a scholarly standpoint, the core discussion is to what extent assimilation and acculturation can be mixed in order to explain the future of a nation. In general terms, assimilation happens when (1) mainstream society acknowledges and allows the incorporation of a minority, and (2) such minority does want to be incorporated into mainstream society. This certainly can be regulated through laws, public policies or political actions. Have you thought, Mr. Huntington, that sometimes minorities are not assimilated because mainstream society does not allow them to assimilate?

Acculturation is practically impossible to regulate in a free and democratic society. Only the most authoritarian regimes throughout the history of humanity have tried to regulate the acculturation of their people in a nation. All of them have failed, and their

people have paid a high price for their government's rationale of imposing the idea of "us vs. them" in cultural terms. Mexico and the United States share a common 2000-mile border and a common history in their economic, political, and social relations. Because of this proximity, cultural transformations in both nations are expected to happen on a permanent and systematic basis.

Mr. Huntington tries to explain the cultural transformation of the future of a single group, in a single nation, in terms of blaming a migrant minority for not being able to get assimilated. The process of acculturation for the Mexican-American case includes interactions between two nations, two people, two cultures, and two languages. In this sense, not everything is bad news; articles like "The Hispanic Challenge" might be a golden opportunity to work on terms like transnational assimilation and transnational acculturation.