

ANDRÁS TARNÓC

SAMUEL P. HUNTINGTON: *KIK VAGYUNK MI? AZ  
AMERIKAI NEMZETI IDENTITÁS DILEMMÁI.*

(Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity)

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“History, despite its wrenching pain,  
Cannot be unlived, but if faced  
With courage, need not be lived again”  
Maya Angelou “On the Pulse of the Morning”

In 1679 the General Court of Massachusetts called the church leaders of the colony into a Synod in order to ascertain the causes of the current crisis. The Synod grappled with two questions: “What are the provoking evils of New England,” and “What is to be done, that so those evils maybe reformed?” (Miller 33). It was Increase Mather, who compiled the proceedings of the Synod into a book titled, *The Result*. Mather's list concerning the potential causes behind the colony's decline included “a great and visible decay of the power of Godliness,” internal turmoil in the churches manifested in “disrespect of inferiors toward superiors, and the appearance of “several seemingly unconnected forms of self-assertion.” Furthermore, heresy, swearing and sleeping during sermons, Sabbath breaking, weakening of family discipline, sex and alcohol abuse, the emergence of the commercial, business-oriented mindset, the people's insistence on evil ways, and finally “the disintegration of the ‘publick spirit’” were also blamed for the general breakdown of New England. (Miller 33–37). *The Result* while hoping to appeal to the “compassion of God” (Miller 39) also offered an action plan for the improvement of the colony.

Samuel Huntington, the noted political scientist, was driven by a similar passion in his exploration of the present crisis of the American identity. In *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* he forwards a vision of America not that far removed from that of Increase Mather. In both authors' cases the inspiration for writing was provided by traumatic assaults against their societies, King Philip's War (1675–1676) and the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, respectively. According to Huntington King Philip's War with a proportional death toll twice that of the Civil War and seven times larger than the loss of American lives incurred in World War Two was the bloodiest conflict in American history. Huntington aptly quotes Richard Slotkin asserting that King Philip's War established the archetype of all American wars by helping Americans to define themselves against the demonized Other. (98). The author posits that instead of Indians America's newest arch-enemy today is militant Islam, moreover, just as King Philip's War reiterated the importance of the colonists's religious convictions, September 11 clearly defined America's identity as a Christian nation.(555).

Proceeding from a global context to the American one Huntington's inquiry employs the didactic approach. The first section, titled "Questions of Identity" "places the American identity crisis into a universal framework suggesting that the current troubles of American society amount to a culture-specific version of a global phenomenon. Huntington also offers four possible solutions to the present crisis. One possible outcome is the loss of America's core culture and the onset of the multicultural society, the second option is the United States splintering into a bicultural country composed of an English-speaking, and Spanish speaking section, the third possibility is the revival of the ethnic and racial clashes of the past, and the final alternative is the development of a new nationwide commitment to the American Creed.

The work's second section, titled "The American Identity" reinforces the author's view of America as a Christian nation built on WASP foundations. In addition to placing the American Creed onto a religious basis, Huntington re-evaluates the role of immigration in American history. In Section Three titled the "Dilemmas of the American Identity," the author enumerates potential threats to a homogeneous WASP culture. Besides multiculturalism such factors are singled out as the new type of immigration resulting in multiple loyalties or limited cultural assimilation and the undermining of the dominance of the English language. The

author's chief concern is the dynamically growing immigration rate from Mexico.

In Section Four, titled "The Renewed American Identity" Huntington points out that due to the declining significance of such concepts as ethnicity and race the United States has become a non-ethnic, and non-racial country populated with multiethnic and multiracial individuals. The author professes that America in the 21st century has to reawaken its religious commitment and this Christian nation can choose from three global role patterns. By taking the cosmopolitan path the U.S. can become a multiethnic and multicultural society with a decreased national identity. The imperialist pattern based on the universality of American values and the global primacy of American power would place the United States at the helm of a transnational empire. Finally the nationalist approach emphasizing the religious commitment and WASP values of the country would call for a clear definition of the American Identity.

Huntington's main argument can be summed up in the following syllogism:

*WASP values and Evangelical Protestantism has always provided a solid foundation for the American Identity.*

*The end of the bipolar world order, the resultant global crisis of national identity, and the rise of the multicultural society undermined the traditional American Identity*

*The nation's renewed commitment to religion and the achievements of WASP culture offer a promising remedy for the crisis of the American Identity*

Huntington's work can be considered a modern day version of a jeremiad, a warning call on the crisis of the American national identity. Huntington identifies numerous symptoms of the decline of the American identity including the weakening of patriotism, the appearance of sub-national identities, the arrival of the new type of immigrants, or the rise of diasporas leading to dual or multiple loyalties, the devaluation of the concept of citizenship, the decline of patriotism and national pride, and the questioning of the notion of a core culture.

Huntington's book is certainly an ambitious, scholarly achievement reflecting the results of careful and thorough research. Its greatest value, however, is its very ability to provoke discussion reinvigorating the field of American Studies.

As far as the author's perspectives of the American Identity are concerned, I would like to make the following observations. Huntington

voices his apprehension over the potential weakening and elimination of a core culture and the United States turning into a multicultural country. Whereas Huntington presently does not consider the United States a multicultural country, and for him multiculturalism appears only as a looming threat, he appears to have overlooked the fact that from the very establishment of the first colony, and witnessed by such historically established concepts as the design of the Great Seal, or the motto of the country, the United States has always been multicultural. Huntington's concern with the potential loss of the core culture is unjustified, as it is also a proven fact that America's core culture has not been lost, only modified as each minority group partially adopted its tenets. While Huntington is correct in his recognition of the American core culture, this concept cannot be imagined as an exclusively WASP entity. The development of the core culture follows an action pattern established by the Euro-American component comprised of three interrelated and not distinctly identifiable stages: separation, self-doubt, and reaffirmation. Thus each component of the color multiculturalism had to establish its own identity by breaking away from the Euro-American core, and to differing extents each subgroup underwent an identity and value crisis eventually emerging with a renewed commitment to carve out its niche within the macrocultural context. The notion of a bicultural and bilingual nation with two clearly defined cultural realms denoted as Hispano and Anglo America is underestimating the cultural power of the other ethnic and racial groups. Whereas Huntington expresses his fear concerning the rise of nativism and racial intolerance along with ethnic confrontations brought on by white Americans defending the discredited and historically invalid ethnicity and race-based concept of American Identity, his view of the American Identity is reflecting those considerations.

Numerous historical, cultural, and sociological studies have proven that the United States cannot be viewed as a static cultural entity. Thus all of the abovementioned consequences are valid ones, that is, all of them are applicable to America. It is the very aspect of American culture as a constantly changing one represented by Fuch's kaleidoscope theory, Bigsby's description of America as a "reservoir of shifting values and images," and Henry Louis Gates' notion of a "polyvocal conversation" that substantiates this assertion.

Huntington's effort to diminish the role of immigration in American history, and give a religious interpretation to the American Creed also invites a rebuttal. The author in his zeal to reinterpret American history

argues that if one insists on the familiar notion of the United States as a nation of immigrants he or she formulates lies from half-truths. (86). While describing a process which resulted in the formation of the country as half-truth is problematic in itself, the author's view of America as a nation of settlers, or colonists should be examined further. Huntington makes a distinction between settlers or colonists and immigrants, presenting the former as creators of political and legal frameworks and cultures, and the latter as mere beneficiaries of the efforts of these Early Founding Fathers. Huntington posits that the settlers had to establish the foundations of America, so that the immigrants could arrive in America. Thus America did not begin in 1775, 1776, or 1787, but with the foundation of Jamestown, Plymouth, and Massachusetts. Furthermore, the author reiterates that America's core culture was established by the settlers, and still reflects their values. (77–78).

While Huntington alludes to the American identity of the settlers of the first colonies, one of the foremost scholars of colonial America, Perry Miller rejects the origination of the Americanization process from the beginning of the seventeenth century: "New England was not an allegiance, it was a laboratory. The theory of feast and of fast days was already complete in every detail: it had not been invented as an engine of Americanization" (26). Moreover, the captivity narratives, viewed by Richard VanDerBeets as the "first (American) literature of catharsis" (548), according to Ralph Bauer "performed important intellectual labor in the emergence of a British national identity" (665).

To contradict Huntington's perception of the American Creed, as a primarily religious concept let the text of the Declaration of Independence suffice in addition to the works of such noted observers of American culture as Tocqueville, Bryce, and Myrdal, The American Creed including primarily such basic elements as equality, freedom, democracy, and individualism is shared by all Americans regardless of class, race, or ethnic background. Consequently, while Protestantism might have functioned as a foundation of the above concepts and privileges, it could not have united all Americans due to its exclusive nature.

Huntington also appeals to Robert Bellah's Civil Religion theory to reinforce the religious nature of the American Identity. The Civil Religion concept described by Virágos as a "complex of symbolic meanings that many Americans share and that unites them in a moral community" (155) includes the following elements: the religious foundation of American government, the belief in the chosenness of the American people, the

proliferation of religious references and symbols in the American public discourse, in addition to the prevalence of sacred texts and sacred rituals symbolizing the nation's dependence on God. Virágos, however, points out that Bellah's Civil Religion concept does not result in a religion, but it represents a "religiously attuned myth of American nationalism [...] possessed of a religious dimension." (158).

Huntington also states that the American nation was the result of the Civil War. While, certainly the Civil War can be considered a crucial component of American history, historians tend to agree that the United States has achieved nation-status after the war of 1812. This is justified by the very characterization of the period between 1815–1832, as the National Era. Moreover, as Tindall asserts: "Immediately after the War of 1812, however, there could no longer be any doubt that an American nation existed" (231). Certainly, the Civil War reinforced the unity of the nation, but did not create it.

Huntington's view of American culture is rather simplistic. While he is correct in recognizing the existence of a core culture, he fails to see that non-WASP groups actively contributed to and share the values of this cultural segment. The American Identity is much more than evangelical Protestantism, although religion can be considered an important part of it. The author also subscribes to the convenient description of American culture as comprised of a cosmopolitan, non-patriotic, liberal elite and the earnestly patriotic, locally active, and committed crowds.

Huntington, as most observers of American culture wants to establish a model, or in his case reintroduce the old, and discredited WASP-dominated concept. However, he falls in the trap of oversimplifying. Bradbury and Temperley argue that the best works in American Studies result not "from the application of single theories but from pre-emptive strikes [...] employing the insights of different fields of study" (18).

Whereas Huntington presents a thorough and ambitious analysis of the development of the American Identity by providing an overview of the immigration process and its social, political, and cultural consequences, his work amounts to an "ideological rescue operation [...] showing, how a culture as a whole tries to protect itself from the withdrawal symptoms of the loss of comforting myths" (Virágos 161). Huntington is not as much preoccupied with the "American Identity" per say, but with presenting his view of America, a country with a renewed exclusive commitment to Christianity, insisting on WASP values, cherishing its European roots and heritage along with the English language.

Who Are We? This question is placed not only to Americans themselves, but to the readers representing any part of the world. By defining ourselves, we also delineate the other. For Huntington, the identity of the other is beyond dispute, Fortress America built on Christian foundations is facing a hostile world. This book is the product of fear, a xenophobic, nativist, and ethnocentric work insisting on heretofore discredited cultural models. America is more than evangelical Protestantism, and a country based upon a core culture surrounded by minority groups. It is the very dynamic of American culture, Huntington misses. It is noteworthy, that his discussion of the American Creed emphasizes that there is no equivalent to this in other parts of the world. However, he fails to explain the universal applicability of the American Dream. He refutes Lionel Sosa's appeal to the Americano Dream: "There is no Americano Dream. Only the American Dream created by WASP America exists" Once again, he is wrong, the American Dream is universal and is open to all immigrants regardless of national origin or English language speaking ability. Immigrants choosing America as their new home did not decide to do so because they wanted to accept WASP values, they felt that there was one country in the world which was dedicated to the principles expressed among others in the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Also, the much-touted Protestant values resulted in such shameful episodes of American history as the religious intolerance of Massachusetts, or the Salem Witch-hunts. Huntington's thoroughly documented and scientifically valuable work follows an unfortunate tradition of nativism-induced writing to which even such intellectual giants also fell victim as William Bradford and Benjamin Franklin. Perhaps, this can offer some comfort to the author as well.

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