

Who Are Americans? Multiethnic or Multicultural?
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The populist resurgence around the world, including our own country, is about identity crisis. Belonging to a "nation" is only a few centuries old. Before that, people identified with their clan, village, or town. Educated and city people identified with their empire, the oldest form of human civilizational organization. But as empires fell, nation states rose.

The nation states were an improvement in some ways over empires in that more people were involved in governance and shared a national culture and language. But as the 20th century showed us, nationalism can be poisonous, resulting in two destructive world wars and a Cold War that could have destroyed the world.

Western European states, after World War II, attempted to replicate the system that the United States had enjoyed: one nation created out of an original 13 separate colonies. Europe created the beginnings of a super-state, the European Union, which is now beginning to collapse. Many French, British, Germans, and Italians, feel that their culture, their very historic identity based on shared blood and shared history, was being undone by the new notion of "multiculturalism." Europe's very identity is under assault by a flood of immigrants with no shared values with Europe.

"Culture" is the essential identifier. It embraces a way of behaving: a common language; common values about right or wrong; religious practices (particularly about duty to the community and rules of behavior); a common standard of justice (how rule of law is applied); and a shared history (relived in holidays, rituals, arts, and literature).

In today's world, even without empire, America's Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture has dominated everywhere that it has gone; it is seductive and people do vote with their feet to join it.

When cultures meet in conflict and one wins, the winner's culture usually, but not always, dominates. There have been other cases in history where a conqueror's culture did not prevail because the conquered people's culture was stronger and more appealing. When the Mongols overran China, they became Chinese; when they overran Persia, they became Persian. England's culture and language survived a Norman French conquest and invasions by Viking occupation. There was something about Anglo-Saxon culture that had staying power.

The only time that multiple cultures can live together in peace is under imperial rule. Empires are multicultural, although the Emperor's culture is the boss. But empires eventually crumble and each culture goes back to its own corner. Places in today's world with dual cultures (Belgium) are always on the brink of civil war and separation. Canada has almost split into French-speaking and English-speaking several times. It may yet happen. The only multicultural country that thrives in the world is Switzerland, and that may be because money (plenty of it) trumps language. The French-, German-, and Italian-speaking Swiss today speak English to each other.

I recommend a book (which I will shortly review): Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity, by Samuel P. Huntington, the author of The Clash of Civilizations, one of the best books of the 20th century. He predicted Islam's "bloody borders" with every other nation before we were paying attention.

Huntington was worried about America's self-identity, no longer knowing who we are and why we are so unique. We are no longer just Anglo-Saxon Protestant white males; Catholics and Jews as now equal American citizens, as are Blacks and women. This works because we all share a common culture. We are multi-ethnic (ancestors from many places); we are multi-racial (Black, White, Asian, and mixed); but we all agree with the same political code, our founding documents. To be multi-cultural, we would have diverse languages, different laws, and different standards of right, wrong, and behavior as citizens.

It is a bad culture that executes one's daughters for "shaming" the family. It is a bad culture to decapitate one's wife for asking for a divorce. And it not OK to gun down people to punish them for "insulting" one's religion. All of these things have happened here, and Huntington's concern was valid. We have one very good culture and had better protect it.

680 words

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