

The New Immigrants And America's Future Identity

WASHINGTON – We now know that the Australian government is openly concerned that unless it can manage its immigration policies properly, there is a serious risk that Australia may soon lose its political and cultural identity. There is fear that there are now too many new economic immigrants who, while living and working in Australia, do not fully understand and embrace the core values that bind Australia together. If this were indeed the case, the country will soon lose its identity and become something else.

Non assimilated immigrants

On the face of it, this stance does not seem to be motivated by anti-immigrant prejudice, or xenophobic hysteria. Rather, it seems to be driven by a genuine concern that all new comers to Australia, even if initially motivated mostly by economic reasons when they decided to become immigrants, along the way have also embraced Australia's national values.

If this is not so, non assimilated economic immigrants may contribute to the progressive fragmentation of the Australian society. This is valid concern in a country largely composed of recent immigrants.

America is also a country of immigrants

If we switch over to the U.S., the current immigration debates, well-meaning in some aspects, emotional and acrimonious in others, are somewhat similar. America is also a country of immigrants. However, there is a significant qualitative distinction between earlier waves of migration to America, mostly from Europe, and the current wave composed mostly of individuals immigrating to the U.S. from Mexico, Central and South America. *Most of the old immigrants wanted*

to become Americans as soon as possible.

In contrast, the new immigrants are usually happy to be here. But they do not feel the same urgency/pressure to quickly assimilate. given this, just like the Australians, we would like to be reassured that there is a way whereby the new immigrants can and will be successfully assimilated into the main stream of American culture and society, just like millions of others before them.

Is the American core still intact?

In other words, as a society, we should be able to feel confident that new waves of immigration will not weaken America's core values as enshrined in the U.S. Constitution. America's core values are relatively simple, yet of fundamental importance. But we cannot assume that every new American truly understands them and will live by them.

Simply stated, America is a country based on popular sovereignty in which the government has been established to preserve individual freedom and serve the People, where accountability is a duty, and the protection of all basic individual freedoms is the main obligation of all public institutions, while a properly functioning system of checks and balances prevents abuses and protects minorities. Sounds really simple.

But it is not at all simple. Understanding the deep meaning and broad implications of these relatively elementary principles requires deep reflection, and in most cases the rejection of other models in which the state is sovereign and the citizen a subject.

No pressure to assimilate

But why can't we be sure that these American principles are properly embraced by the new immigrants? Very simple. Fundamental changes have occurred in the immigration process

in the last 20 to 30 years. Absorbing core values was an integral part of the assimilation process, mostly because new immigrants wanted to be part of the mainstream.

But here is the thing. Assimilation as we understood it until a few decades ago may not be happening anymore. New immigrants are no longer automatically “blended”, this way quickly becoming Americans. The US has already become a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-lingual society, with distinctive ethnic enclaves within which people preserve the language, culture and belief systems of their country of origin.

And this happened in large measure because there is no longer any strong incentive nor pressure to assimilate and be assimilated. It is a fact that in the U.S. many states or regions within them now are predominantly Hispanic or Latino, and Spanish-speaking. Other ethnic enclaves also exist; but the communities from south of the border are by far the largest.

No pressure to embrace American core values

Let me be absolutely clear. These relatively new Americans are mostly industrious, good people. Still, if we cannot be sure that these new immigrants, after they came here, fully embraced the American political culture and its underlying values, overtime this will lead to a significant –in fact structural– transformation of the America we know today.

And since America developed and grew in what it is today because its diverse citizens subscribed to a certain set of constitutional principles, it is important to check as to whether most citizens still share those beliefs. And if some do not, we have a real problem.

There is no more a “melting pot”

The main –and probably irreversible– change when it comes to the difference between old and new immigration, is that the

old "melting pot" metaphor used to describe America no longer applies. Up to the 1960s the "melting pot" was a fair representation of the willingness and ability of the American society to receive, absorb and homogenize large waves of diverse immigrants, this way turning them rather quickly into "true Americans" .

All this no longer applies. The US ceased to be this mostly Anglo-Saxon "cultural blender" that overtime absorbed, digested, homogenized and integrated millions of other immigrants coming from different backgrounds.

Old immigrants under pressure to become assimilated

How did this happen? Here is the thing. The reason why the "melting pot " metaphor no longer applies is about the fundamental difference between the immigration experience of the Europeans who came to America a hundred years ago and the experience of the Latinos who come today. The qualitative distinction is that most of the older immigrants –in particular the Europeans– came to the U.S. with a keen awareness, explicit or implicit, that by immigrating into the U.S. they had also permanently severed their ties to their countries of origin.

Sure, in many cases they would retain, at least the immigrant generation, a specific identity within the American ethnic mosaic. But most of them were absolutely bent on "becoming Americans", as soon as possible. Rightly or wrongly, fast assimilation was deemed to be the ticket into the American mainstream. With assimilation came acceptance; and therefore more economic and social opportunities, for the new immigrants and certainly for their children growing up in America.

Superficial differences remained

Looking among newcomers to America a century ago, one could have easily recognized Polish Americans as different from Italian Americans. But, by and large, whatever the different

countries of origin, physical appearance and accents, there was a unifying trait that most new immigrants shared.

Indeed, those who came to the U.S. and stayed here had made a total commitment to becoming Americans, and to place any residual tie or connection with their country of origin: linguistic, cultural or culinary, on a much lower tier.

Old ties soon dissolved

Furthermore, in many if not most cases, the new immigrants were unable or unwilling to preserve their linguistic identity and pass it on to the following generations. Many of them were often semi-literate or illiterate within their own cultures. Thus they did not have the tools to preserve linguistic and cultural complexities that they did not fully master.

Therefore, the kaleidoscope of exotic last names that still today dots the American landscape has value mostly for the ethnographers and historians who can spot and identify Norwegian, Irish, Greek, Russian, Polish, Portuguese, or German origins.

Immigrants intermarried

However, if we fast forward to today, the individuals who bear those last names –the descendants of the original immigrants– with a few exceptions, usually can barely tell you that their great grand parents came from somewhere in Ireland or Germany. Besides, mixed marriages among different immigrants blurred the picture even further. The Italians intermarried with the Irish and their offspring later on with other descendants of other nationals. A third or fourth generation American today can easily be part German, Swedish, Scottish, Russian and Greek. Therefore, for him or her it is almost impossible to determine a meaningful national or cultural origin, let alone have strong feelings of belonging to it.

Immigrants today stay connected

Well, today it is different, very different. And the basic difference between these old waves of immigrants and the Latino waves rests largely on geographic proximity to the countries of origin, and the consequent easy travel back and forth, relatively higher standards of living, and the availability of low cost or zero cost communication tools that keep the old ties alive and relevant. This level of communication between new immigrants and their country of origin was simply unimaginable a century ago.

A hundred years ago, most European immigrants by and large came on a one way third class ticket on overcrowded steamers. ***Once they had landed, and after they had been processed at Ellis Island, they were psychologically and materially committed to a fast track to integration in order to increase their chances of improving their lot vis-a-vis the other Americans. In most cases, going back to the country of origin was out of the question. Immigration to America was final. Thus, embracing this new world, in all its aspects, including its political culture and values, was absolutely necessary in order to have a chance to succeed in it.***

Ties to the country of origin

The Latinos belonging to this new wave of migration instead do not have the same urgency to assimilate. They come by bus, by car or by air, many of them across the Mexican border. For the most part, (even if we take out the many who do not have legal papers who therefore cannot cross the border back and forth for fear of apprehension), except for the very poor, these immigrants have the opportunity to travel at least occasionally to their country of origin. Some do this rather frequently. Back home in Mexico, El Salvador or Colombia there are many relatives and circles of old friends. US-based immigrants send money back to them. At least some of them plan to make enough money in America, so that they can bring their savings back home and live comfortably there.

To think of Polish peasants transplanted in Illinois at the turn of the last century taking an even occasional summer vacation to visit relatives back in the village is preposterous. Except for the extremely successful few who had become really rich in America, hardly anybody ever went back.

Easy to communicate

On top of that, nowadays, even for the relatively poor Latinos, phone and video contact with relatives back home is the norm rather than the exception; while the gigantic remittance flows from the U.S. into Central and South America, indicate continues involvement with families and communities in the countries of origin.

And the retention of the Spanish language as the primary or at least co-equal language is an indication that these immigrants do not have the same urgency to integrate and in some fashion forget about their origins. They see no need for this.

Large immigrant communities retain their identities

The strength of large numbers in most cases may help in shaping attitudes. No need to learn English fast in large communities where the Spanish-speaking Latino population is actually the majority. Indeed, at least in some communities in the U.S. it is possible to have a reasonably "normal" life in terms of semi-decent work opportunity without any need to acquire real English fluency, something that certainly was not the case, even in the most "ethnic" states or regions, at the height of the European immigration waves.

Learning English used to be the ticket to success

Certainly, even in the past there have been many large ethnic islands within the United States. And it is true that many immigrants could get by in America with little or no English. However, the understanding of all was that English was the only official language of the country and that all official

transactions would be conducted in English. No equivalent at that time of the now ubiquitous “press 2 for Spanish”, in any telephone help line, let alone taking driver license tests in languages other than English, or the notion of having officially sanctioned bilingual education.

We know that being an American is not about ethnicity, as demonstrably there is no “American” ethnic group. ***However, becoming an American is both possible and absolutely necessary, if we want the original American ethos, as enshrined in the U.S. Constitution, to be preserved.***

And it all boils down to the voluntary and sincere embrace (“without mental reservation, or purpose of evasion”, as the Oath all citizens have to take says), of a set of constitutional principles and the values that sustain them.

Immigrants had to become Americans

Of course, we know that, even in the past, most immigrants coming to the U.S. were primarily economic immigrants, driven by material needs, rather than by lofty political ideals.

However –and this is a crucial distinction between then and now– whether they liked it or not, the old immigrants were “forced” by circumstances to buy into the prevailing Anglo-Saxon political culture and become sooner than later “homogenized Americans”, thus quickly shedding the legacy of their origins and embracing America and its core values, at least in most cases. As indicated above, at that time, America was a genuine melting pot. Today, it is a completely different story. No more a melting pot.

Civics exams do not make citizens

True enough, the rule today is that before being naturalized, that is legally accepted into the American society and polity, all applicants must take and pass a test of basic knowledge of the U.S. Constitution.

This is not a bad idea. But since this is the only test, it is a truly low bar. So low, in fact, that it is insignificant. Demonstrating decent knowledge about how many Justices sit on the U.S. Supreme Court is important, but hardly conclusive evidence that the would-be US citizen understands –and most importantly agrees with– the principles of the American Constitution when it comes to the preservation of individual liberties, popular sovereignty, limited government, or the purpose of effective checks and balances, let alone the values that should sustain these core principles.

No real differences among the descendants of earlier immigrants

When political leaders today affirm that the strength of America lies in the diverse backgrounds of the diverse immigrant population that somehow enriches all of us, they are talking nonsense. They should know that when we talk about Americans of European descent, today this “diversity” is in fact so superficial that its is in fact insignificant. They know that the descendants of those Italian, Swedish, Portuguese, German, Russian and Greek immigrants are now indistinguishable from one another.

Indeed, while some of them may have retained some superficial traces of their distinctiveness, (Italian Americans may have dark hair, Scandinavian Americans have blonde hair), at this is point they are all homogenized Americans. Kohl, Lantos, Giuliani, Voinovich, Kerry, Tenet, Dukakis, Rubio, Pompeo, just to stay within the sphere of people involved in public policy, are all “ethnic” names. Yet, all these are Americans –with a capital A.

Latin immigration is different

However, ten years from now, will we say the same about the Mercado, Martinez, Ortiz, Lopez and Rodriguez who will be the Mayors, Senators, Governors and eventually national leaders of

America? The critical difference between the old and the new immigrants is that many Latinos did not and do not have the same pressure to integrate and quickly become "*homogenized Americans*".

Both old and new immigrants appreciated then and appreciate now the opportunity to have a better life in the USA. However, to the extent that the new immigrants (most of them from Central and Latin America) can easily maintain an active connection with their countries of origin, (something that those who came along with the previous immigration waves simply could not do), they do not seem to have the same urgency to totally and quickly transform themselves into "*Anglo*".

Embracing America and its values

If, while preserving the old family and cultural ties, all or at least most of them would voluntarily choose to truly and fully embrace the values of their adopted country, this would be a genuine achievement of good multiculturalism.

Let me be clear, this is not about "forcing" people to abandon their cultures, their language and their roots. There is absolutely nothing wrong in retaining and cultivating one's culture and language of origin, as long as there is also a genuine embrace of American values up to the point that they become the key reference.

But, here is the thing. The old immigrants willingly or unwillingly were "*sucked into America*".

As for today's immigrants, realistically most of them will not spend sleepless nights poring over the *Federalist Papers* or other tomes on Jefferson or the U.S. Constitution in order to critically understand and fully appreciate America's core values and how they were incorporated into the Constitution.

But here is the thing. Without the perception that in order to

have a normal life in America they need to embrace the values of this society, most new immigrants will simply tend to their own private affairs. And, in the pursuit of their own interests, they will be guided by the principles that they acquired in their formative years.

America is not just the place you found work

If this is so, regarding these new waves of immigrants, we cannot rest assured that their value systems and beliefs are or will be the same as those that are prevalent among other Americans, simply because their backgrounds are different and their learning and socialization took place in a different context, while the urgency to embrace American values is simply not there.

And herein is the challenge. America has worked reasonably well so far because a recognizable political culture has been preserved and passed on to new generations and millions of new immigrants over more than two hundred years through a fairly successful homogenization process that caused total outsiders—millions of immigrants from different countries—to become integrated into the American mainstream rather painlessly and in a relatively short time.

More than just language

The substantial recent inflow of millions of people from nearby Mexico, Central and South America who bring with them not just another language but also different values and who see neither the obligation nor the need to fully understand and subscribe to the American political culture will bring about substantial qualitative changes. These changes will provoke new debates about what is it that we mean by “*being an American*”.

Once again, let me be clear. I am not even remotely suggesting that all these new Latin immigrants are disloyal or suspect people. I am simply suggesting that most of them are

fundamentally economic immigrants who –unlike the European economic immigrants who landed here more than a century ago– are not under any pressure to understand, absorb and fully embrace American values.

Many Americans do not know much about their history and values

True, the notion that all the descendants of the old European waves have an unflinching, clear understanding as to what are the American values that they theoretically subscribe to is highly questionable. Indeed, many do not. But, at least in general, they cannot look at political or cultural alternatives that derive from other perspectives that coexist in their cultural and personal universe.

That said, if anything, the lukewarm appreciation about the distinctiveness of American political culture and values among many descendants of older immigrants complicates the problem, as it does not present to the new immigrants a really clear picture of the value system that they should absorb in order to become “real” Americans.

America is a political society shaped by shared values

We all know that America is a rather unique country, in as much as those who are here today cannot point to a shared ethnic, religious or cultural identity. America is not a Nation-State in the European sense. America is a community of people coming from a variety of countries who freely decided to subscribe to a set of values which became the unifying principles of this republic.

Americans are Americans because they share a political culture. Until not too long ago, the implicit assumption was that all of those who are here genuinely understand it and willfully embrace it.

This political culture has been the intangible yet ultra strong magic glue that kept this complex machinery of the

American society together. Going forward, we have to face the fact that this glue may not be as strong a bonding agent as it used to be.

A new era

And we have to face this fact now. Indeed, for the first time in our complex history, we have a large chunk of new immigrants who may very well live here as law-abiding, productive citizens; but who are under no pressure to truly join in by sincerely embracing our political culture.

Again, let me stress that this does not automatically make these new immigrants disloyal or dangerous citizens. But it makes them different.

Just like the previous waves of immigration into America, these are predominantly economic immigrants. ***However, unlike the immigrants of old, these relatively recent immigrants did not and will not go through the “political and cultural indoctrination”, benign or “forced”, willfully accepted or “suffered” by millions of others before them. The old blender that homogenized everybody and made them into “true Americans” is no longer working.***

The new immigrants are different. Their large and growing numbers will affect the culture and the values of the broader society in which they live, and eventually they will radically transform it –its value systems and core beliefs. How this transformation will change America and us all is impossible to predict.

But America will never be the same.