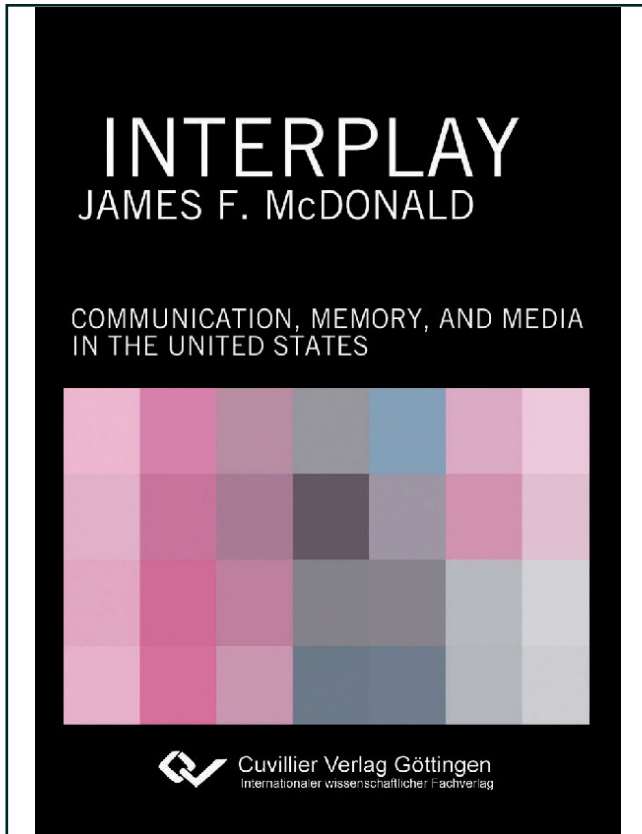




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Interplay

Communication, Memory, and Media in the United States



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- (1) a self-contained idea, either borrowed or newly invented, usually having a simple repetition pattern used as the basis for a set of variations;
- (2) a characteristic idea or group of ideas that figure prominently in the structure of a work or a movement thereof. The term is used loosely to designate any prominent and easily remembered melody within a large work.

Theodore Karp, *Dictionary of Music*

On the first of May, 2006, great and seemingly spontaneous protests occurred throughout the United States. Latin American immigrants and their supporters demonstrated on what was to become known as “the Day without an Immigrant” (or *el gran paro*) which was undertaken in part as a reaction to US congressional legislation that would directly affect the status of illegal immigrants in the United States. The government deliberation that elicited the protests was itself a symptom of a continuing public discussion regarding economic and cultural costs of Latin American immigration. It was, in fact, the institutional form of an ongoing debate between opponents and supporters of immigration restrictions, and the timing of the protests and the legislation was, of course, not accidental. Both came as delayed responses to increasingly sensational immigration rhetoric

¹ The beginning of the theme from jazz pianist Bill Evan's 1962 work “Interplay:” the source of the title of this work.

precipitated in part by the publication of the US Census Report of the year 2000. In the years following its publication, the report's findings had been the subject of intense public scrutiny as the Census Department was able to claim that for the first time in the nation's history, Latinos had become the largest *minority* in the US population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). This finding, coupled with the evolving linguistic and cultural realities that such a demographic change brings, eventually led to passionate public discussions about American identity with special emphasis on the political and economic ramifications of legal and illegal Latin American immigration.

Developments in the composition of the US population and the (mostly regional) influences of large foreign-born segments provoked debates in a number of forums in a range of media. The discussions themselves were often political ones, involving the presentation and evaluation of various strategic “solutions” to the immigration “problem.” Frequently, these discussions involved explicit cultural audits in which ambitious authors offered passionate yet categorical descriptions of what “America” is and how it can be best defined. Debates that began as immigration policy analyses evolved into discussions of American identity and sometimes became philosophical discussions of freedom, justice, and the American Way of Life. (cf. Pickus, 2005; Alba & Nee, 2005; Kaufmann, 2004) A changing cultural/communicative reality in the United States caused many Americans, therefore, to evaluate their national identity quite consciously, or at the very least exposed many American media consumers to frequent public exchanges on topics of immigration and national identity. American culture was being defined and re-defined daily in national news programs, the opinion columns of local newspapers, and in conversations between individual citizens.

For the detailed discussion of the national identity and culture of the United States that is to follow in this study, it is important to outline the theoretical foundations and definitions of the terminology that has in recent years been the subject of intensive academic scrutiny. Abstract ideas such as “culture” and “identity” are often discussed with great care among social scientists, and their definitions are critically evaluated and regularly revised. The recent political and demographic developments in the US, however, have demonstrated that the academic definitions remain largely unknown to the broader public where the terms “culture” and “identity” find frequent use. Great academic attention has been devoted, for example, to the description of the specific concept of “identity” in various branches of the social sciences, beginning with the psychological work of Erikson's *Childhood and Society*. (1950) Anglophone sociology adopted the idea of identity theory quite enthusiastically in the 1970's and 1980's (cf. Stryker, 1968; Weigert, 1983), and the popularity of the concept led thereafter to its extensive use in many branches of the social sciences. Attempts to circumscribe the term have been far from satisfying, as a consensus regarding the definition of the word

has yet to be found. Discussions surrounding identity, though, have led to a number of fruitful debates and the eventual refinement of the term. Even more recently, European scholars have made great progress in agreeing upon some general definitions of “culture” as a scientific term, but again there is little unity among academics regarding the description and definition of that word². A new and specific conception of “culture,” however will be indispensable to this work. The inflexible, common-sense descriptions of “culture” (US culture or otherwise) are no longer viable, and not only are new definitions required, but novel ways to understand what culture is and where it might come from are also needed. Fortunately, the limitations of the obsolete common-sense models are brilliantly illustrated in the Latin American immigration debate of the first years of the 21st century. These events will serve as a context for the presentation of recent work in the field of cultural studies that will be present throughout this examination of United States culture. This short chapter, therefore, will outline the theme of the work to follow. It will offer a framework for a *general* definition of culture that will also be employed in the extensive analysis of US culture *specifically*. This chapter, therefore, is the analog to a musical theme because it will be present throughout the entire work, but will be revealed each time in a different voice in the three variations of the three main chapters to follow.

1. America and América

If music is to be a recurring metaphor in this study, the immigration example used to illustrate common misconceptions regarding culture and intercultural communication might be likened to two choruses singing in unrelated keys. An examination of some of the representatives of both sides of the public discussion illustrates not only the common assumptions regarding the nature of culture and intercultural communication, but indeed a broadening of the context of the debate itself through the examination of culture and communication reveals the true boundaries of the immigration debate. On the topic of Latin American influence in the United States, for example, the inimitable Samuel Huntington writes:

There is no Americano dream. 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. (2004, p. 256)

And in direct response to Huntington's well-known position on this topic:

An alternative possibility, however, is that most Americans, whatever their ethnic background, endorse the motto of e pluribus unum and the idea of sharing a

² Made clear in Raymond Williams' quip that “Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language.” (cited in Jenks, 2004, p.12)

common culture that evolves as newcomers add elements of their cultural heritage to the American way of life. Even if their own immigrant roots are in the distant past and attachment to their culture heritage has faded away, Americans might still acknowledge that an egalitarian “festival multiculturalism”—the acceptance of growing diversity in song, food, dance, and cultural heroes—helps define America’s identity as a nation of immigrants. In this pluralistic version of the melting pot, ethnic allegiances and patriotism are complementary rather than competing identities. (Citrin et al, 2007, p.31)

Naturally, public exchanges regarding immigration at the beginning of the 21st century have been mediated by a range of experts in both the English and Spanish-language mass media of the United States. On one side, the English-speaking experts and media outlets were admittedly surprised by the massive “spontaneous” demonstrations of 2006 (Bernstein, 2006), while consumers of the Spanish media were well-informed and well-prepared for their *gran paro*. The fact that there seem to be at least two distinct media worlds (*life-worlds*, one could say) within what is often thought to be a single national media market is not insignificant. Nevertheless, the unexpected scale of the day's protests elicited a variety of enthusiastic responses from both academic and mass-media sources. Spanish-language protests, demonstrators under foreign flags, and the overt support of Catholic Church (Bernstein, 2006) all contributed to an acute sense that a cultural tipping point was approaching and the reaction came through a number of lengthy and passionate rebuttals from familiar sources. Unfortunately, the loudest voices on both sides were defending fundamentally flawed premises.

For example, while certainly not a direct response to the *gran paro*, Samuel Huntington's work *Who Are We?* was typical and even prophetic as one of the earlier popular works to examine this most recent phase of Latin American immigration. Huntington's efforts in the field of cultural delineation are well-known, of course, and political action often appears to follow themes outlined in his works. After the census results of 2000, he published a variation on his *Clash of Civilizations* theme, posing the existential titular question to concerned Americans confronted with a perceived threat to their own identity. As expected, Huntington does his best to answer the question “who are we?” in clear terms and categories:

America was created by 17th- and 18th-century settlers who were overwhelmingly white, British, and Protestant. Their values, institutions, and culture provided the foundation for and shaped the development of the United States in the following centuries. They initially defined America in terms of race, ethnicity, culture, and religion. Then, in the 18th century, they also had to define America ideologically to justify independence from their home country, which was also white, British, and

Protestant. Thomas Jefferson set forth this “creed,” as Nobel Prize-winning economist Gunnar Myrdal called it, in the Declaration of Independence, and ever since, its principles have been reiterated by statesmen and espoused by the public as an essential component of U.S. Identity. (2004, p.11)

In the passage above, Huntington connects himself to a long and proud lineage of American thinkers who have, throughout history, “had to define America ideologically” for a number of often pragmatic reasons. For Huntington, there are clear and important historical borders separating “who we are” from whom “they” happen to be. His characterization of American identity as something to be “defined” is indicative of a certain conceptualization of the word *culture* that is widespread today, and its general acceptance became even clearer during the time surrounding the *gran paro* of 2006. Huntington's orientation is descriptive, quite inflexible, and categorical. Additionally, the author sees no need to establish what terms like “culture” or “identity” or even more potentially volatile terms like “ideology” or “creed” happen to mean. Content to outline the features of our culture and theirs, little attention is devoted to what a *culture* is at all, and the author assumes that the definitions of these important terms correspond adequately to the common-sense understanding his readers bring to the work. For the most part, Huntington's assumption appears to have been well-founded, since the immigration debate on both sides rarely strayed from confident descriptions of America – past, present, and future. Rarely did the participants take on the greater questions of culture and communication that supported the stage upon which the protesters marched and Samuel Huntington pontificated.

Despite the scrap of common theoretical ground between the immigration supporters and opponents (to simplify the debate), Huntington's conclusions understandably met with both criticism and praise, but it is not the goal of this short review to establish which side has greater validity. Those aligned with Huntington value his work as something “worth ten divisions in the new American culture [*sic*] war” (O'Sullivan, 2004), for example, but criticisms from a variety of sources are certainly not scarce³. Huntington's manner of diagnosis is unsurprising, however. He has been a frequent and vocal contributor to a number of similar recent debates regarding generalized threats to “US culture.” He is instructive in this context not because his views are revolutionary or themselves represent a novel perspective on the latest “culture war.” On the contrary, Huntington's contribution is important to this discussion of culture and communication precisely because it is uncreative and mirrors the assumptions of his readers, the media, and indeed most of his critics. The mistaken assumption

3 The range is surprising when one looks for critics of Huntington *specifically*. At one end are works of commercial promotion for workplace multiculturalism (cf. Thomas, 2005, p.22 ff.) offering readers a chance to “move to the next level” (presumably beyond Huntington) through “diversity.” Another, perhaps more damaging critic is the sometime ally of Huntington, Francis Fukuyama, who wrote the essay “Why We Shouldn't Worry About the 'Hispanization' of the United States” (2005, p.342) in direct response to *Who Are We?*

that is central to his argument against the free entry of Latin American immigrants is that the broad lines (real or symbolic) that “define” the frontiers of one culture and over which other “civilizations” may not cross do not exist.

Critics of Huntington argue that there is ample room in the US for both cultures to live side by side (Thomas, 2005, p.22 ff.), but pro-immigration, diversity, or multiculturalism-based attacks on works like *Who Are We?* likewise build their arguments on theoretical sand. Much as Huntington himself does, proponents of more liberal immigration policies do so based on well-meaning but quite unrealistic assumptions regarding the nebulous but undeniable benefits of multicultural America⁴. Both imply that the cultural costs of immigration are either destructive or additive and therefore in some way tangible. One side would claim that once a critical mass of foreigners enters an “ideologically-defined” (Huntington) cultural space, the dominant identity is obviously threatened and in danger of being *displaced*. The opposing side would counter that multiculturalism is possible with, as in this example Anglo-Americans and Latin-Americans preserving their cultures in colorful coexistence. While each camp defends its positions passionately, both arguments are flawed for reasons that will become clear in this brief chapter.

Despite fundamental theoretical flaws, however, Huntington and his devotees, his critics, and otherwise legions of concerned Americans have been able to participate in a debate regarding the future of US culture under the influence of mass immigration. The poverty of the cultural models upon which their exchanges are conducted represents, therefore, a shared handicap and arguably may have led to the stalemate and lack of satisfactory solutions⁵ to problems that all parties recognize.

Not surprisingly, in the years following the Census report and Huntington's manifesto, US publishing houses, television outlets, and periodicals have since devoted significant resources to a range of authors treating the subject of Latin-American immigration in the US. Limiting the discussion to print media (in this case, the most easily examined of the US mass-media), one finds a continuum of Huntington acolytes ranging from the nativist/populist works of Pat Buchanan through the more sensationalist and personal writings of Daniel Sheehy and on to comparatively serious investigative studies by authors like Otis Graham.

4 The works of Gregg Zachary come to mind, who never directly confronts Huntington, but is certainly a supporter of a typical form of multiculturalism prized more for its utility than for reasons of social or political justice: “[Multicultural personalities] have more perspective than the one-dimensional person and are more willing to rebel against tradition or question habitual ways of thinking or doing” (2000).

5 The fact that proposed solutions to undesired immigration have often involved wall-building and border-guarding (cf. Payan, 2006 & Nevins, 2001) reveals some of the unquestioned assumptions about the static, almost *material* nature of cultural influence that will be discussed extensively later.