Migration and Modernity

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Through a discussion of Mexican migration to the United States I look at how categories of modernity are still present and being used to distinguish populations as modern or pre-modern, civilized or backward. I argue that these distinctions have come from a particular conception of time as homogenous, empty and universal.¹ I discuss the ways in which a single measure of time maps onto different spatial configurations such that populations in different parts of the world can be described along a continuum from less to more developed and hence come to be labeled as backward/pre-modern, developing or developed/modern. I suggest that this spatio-temporal yardstick is then used in defense of the nation to justify the exclusion of Mexican migrants from the imagined national community.

Introduction

In his recent book Who Are We: Challenges to America’s National Identity, Samuel Huntington asks, “Are we a “we,” one people or several? If we are a “we,” what distinguishes us from the “thems” who are not us?”² Huntington’s query goes right to the heart of the current policy debate on Mexican immigration in the United States, one that asks, as he does in the title of his book, who are we? I suggest that to answer this question we must look at the historical frames which inform the production of the “American” “we” and which make possible a “them.” In other words, we must look at the way in which cultural “difference” is created within a nation that claims to be composed primarily of immigrants, or culturally “different” groups. How is it that those who were “native” to the territory now called “the United States” have become “them” while immigrants from Europe have become “us”? In a “multicultural” and multiethnic society,

¹ Walter Benjamin (1968) originally discussed the idea of empty, homogenous time, however, the postcolonial theorists used this concept of universal time to critique the progress narratives imposed by the colonizers to justify their colonial projects.
who counts as an “us” and who a “them” anyway? Based on what criteria? And how do these distinctions inform “public” policy?

While I agree with Huntington that the root of the distinction between the “us” and “them” that he discusses lies in the cultural sphere, I disagree with his conception of “American” culture as a fixed and unified Anglo-Protestant whole. Rather, I argue that Huntington’s conception of cultural “difference” is a product of a particularly modern and Western cultural construction which I will call “the modern world view.” Within this world view homogenous time and bounded geographic space form an explanatory framework for the purported “difference” between national groups. I suggest that race and nation are categories through which this relationship between “self” and “other” is expressed.

In the following sections I discuss the ways in which the “modern world view” has contributed to the production of cultural “difference” used to distinguish the “us” from the “them’s.” I argue that the secularization of the world and the emergence of the “self” contribute to a historicist narrative of individual and national “development” which informs the production of cultural “difference” in the “West.” In the final section I challenge what Gupta and Ferguson (1992) have called “the convenient fiction that mapped cultures onto places and peoples.”³ I argue that while the categories of modernity are still available and being used to define a racist and nationalist project in the United States the binary between “us” and “them” does not speak to a clear separation between cultures developing separately and in opposition to each other as the modern world view would have it, but rather operates such that the cultural “difference” between groups is actually only possible through their mutual dependence and constitution. Given this,

Huntington’s “we” depends most on the “thems” he would exclude from the imagined national community (Anderson 1993).

**Modern World View(s)**

> The concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogenous, empty time.⁴

With Foucault (1986), I look at modernity as an attitude rather than a period in history. By “attitude” he means, “a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end a way of thinking and feeling; a way too of acting and behaving.” From a Western perspective, modern men share the modern attitude. By contrast, those who do not have it are considered pre-modern or still “developing.” Historically, those considered (or, indeed who consider themselves) to be developed have been Anglo men while those who have been considered pre-modern or still developing have been people of color, “Third World” peoples and women. Below, I ask what changes were necessary in order for this “difference’ to be produced and what are the implications for judging “different” groups?

What modernity was said to have ushered in was nothing less than the separation of man from nature, changes in “his” perception of time and space facilitated by scientific discovery and advancing technology.⁵ Central to these changes was the idea that man was now the subject of history which also meant that all historical analysis placed him as the center. No longer did the gods reign supreme as the makers of meaning. Man was both the maker and interpreter of meaning. As Weber (1992) explains, the world had become disenchanted.

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⁵ Throughout this essay I will refer to the subject of modernity as male and “western” because that is who modern historicist narratives are meant to represent.
Since the world had become disenchanted, time was also secularized. This meant that the meaning of the world was no longer derived from embodiments and archetypes, but from the “disengaged, particular self” who narrates his “own” history through a series of events, “a chain of happenings in [a singular] world time.” Man could only become the relational center of that which is when the comprehension of what is as a whole changes. This change is what Heidegger (1977) calls a ‘modern world view.’ Taylor (1989) describes it as “a revolution in the basic categories in which we understand self.” According to both of these authors, an epistemological and ontological shift occurred in which man not only understood himself differently, but the categories through which he previously knew himself also changed. The difference according to Taylor is that “the modern subject is self-defining, where on previous views the subject is defined in relation to a cosmic order.” This shift was particularly Western and became a lens for judging non-Western populations and classifying them as “inferior” or “less developed.”

The new freedom from cosmic ties entailed a sense of control over the world which in turn meant that the world could be manipulated for the needs and desires of man. It also meant that man could come to know himself through his relation to, and domination of nature. This is a significant change from the pre-modern world in which individuals did not exist as autonomous and abstracted subjects. The pre-moderns were part of a larger whole determined by forces external to themselves. The moderns, by contrast, were the authors of their own lives and controllers of their own nature, as well as the natural world around them. As Sumner Maine (1986) explains, “society in

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primitive times was not what it is assumed to be at present, a collection of individuals.”

As a result, man’s “own” body became his property to be used as he alone wished. As Locke (1982) explains, “Though the earth, and all inferior creatures be common to all men, yet every man has a property in his own person. This no body has any right to but himself. The Labour of his body and the work of his hands, we may say, are properly his.” Accordingly, man was no longer under obligation to the family or to God and therefore could enter into contractual relations with other free men to sell his labour as he liked (Maine 1986).

In modernity, one’s “own” inner nature is what provides one with meaning and drive. Taylor explains that the way in which nature comes to be both norm and internal guide for the moderns is “so utterly different from the ancient view” because it places individuals in charge of their own lives. Autonomy and self-examination are possible in modernity in a way they were not possible prior. At the heart of the change is the idea that subjects are now individuated wholes capable of self-knowledge and self-control rather than parts of a universe where meaning is provided from a source external to their minds and bodies.

According to ‘the modern world view’, man became the author of his own life; he was no longer subject to, but became the subject of history. He alone was responsible for making and assigning meaning to his existence- past, present and future. The idea that historical meaning was man-made is what Georg G. Iggers (1995) calls historicism. Historicism is undergirded by a notion of developmental progress which was both defined by man and which made man the central historical actor. Chakrabarty (2000)

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7 Sumner Maine, 1986, p.121.
calls historicism a mode of thinking which tells us that in order to understand the nature of anything in this world we must see it as an historically developing entity, that is, first as an individual and unique whole—as some kind of unity at least in potential—and second, as something that develops over time. Historicism is what makes possible the idea that individuals have the potential to progress, or to draw from a Darwinian conception, evolve. Indeed, it is only through looking back into his past that modern man can see his progress.

Iggers explains that “historicism, the recognition that all human ideas and values are historically conditioned and subject to change, had become the dominant, inescapable attitude of the Western world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.” Through historicism, both the meaning and the development of all things can be determined by man over time where time was perceived as a homogenous continuum from the past to the future. Not only could man judge his present against his past, he could also judge his individual progress against others living within the same historical continuum. Therefore, historicism became the tool through which man could judge his own development in relation both to his predecessors and his contemporaries in order to gauge his and their progress. Historicism, then, is one of the primary tools for producing cultural “difference.”

**Historicism as a measure of cultural difference**

*Beginnings and endings may be the sustaining myths of the middle years; but in the fin de siècle, we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion.*

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9 Chakrabarty, 2000, pp.23.
10 Iggers, 1995, p. 133.
Historicism is based on a view of historical time as a singular container within which “contingent” events could take place in diverse regions. This is why postcolonial scholars draw on Walter Benjamin’s term “empty, homogenous time” to describe the development of “cultural difference” because, “irrespective of a society’s own understanding of temporality, a historian will always be able to produce a time line for the globe, in which for any given time, the events in area X, Y, and Z can be named” and compared. Time and space come together in historicism to measure populations according to their cultural “development.”

E.P. Thompson (1966) gives us an example of this cultural distinction according to temporal orientation in his classic essay “Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism.” Linking capitalism and modernity, he claims that there are two kinds of time: task-oriented and clock time. Task-oriented time is that of the pre-moderns, or “primitive peoples” because it is driven by “natural” rhythms such as the tides and the sun. Clock time, on the other hand, is a more “straightforward time-measurement” offering a rational guide for calculating working hours and leisure time. Clock time is the time of modernity because it is rational, scientific and driven by man. It is the time of discipline, industry and capitalism. By contrast, task-orientation is the time of pre-modernity, driven by nature and, as he explains, “the most effective orientation in peasant societies.”

Thompson states that the changes in the inward notation of time from task to clock influenced work habits, incentives and most importantly, human nature across the globe. He contends that from the seventeenth century on, the image of clock-work had “engrossed the universe.” As Thompson’s essay suggests, singular time became a

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universally applicable measure in modernity through which the historical progress of people across the globe could be compared both within the same historical moment, as well as across a singular historical continuum. As a result of this singular time and using capitalism as the measure, it became possible to gauge whether different groups were moving forward, backward or stagnating in relation to each other.

Thompson describes the views of those who operated on a universal time as they compared themselves to the task-oriented. He writes, “to men accustomed to labour timed by the clock, [a task-oriented] attitude to labour appears to be wasteful and lacking in urgency.” Those who worked by the clock could compare their progress in terms of industry and efficiency against the task-oriented. Inefficiency and a lack of urgency from this perspective were signs of not having arrived into modernity, indeed of not possessing the necessary ontological orientation, or as Foucault would have it, “attitude,” to come out of the historical waiting room and into the modern world. The existence of such seeming ontological backwardness is all the more striking to the clock-oriented labourer because through his own attitude and actions he is providing an example of the superiority of efficiency and progress to task-oriented work. Because the task-oriented worker has the example, but does not use it, he is perceived as willingly wasteful and inefficient. He, therefore, appears to have chosen not to become modern. Using time as a measurement, the clock-worker is not only able to judge his industrial progress in relation to the task-oriented, he is also able to justify his world view as superior.

The task-oriented worker is seen as tied to the land and nature. For this reason he is perceived as more “natural,” “traditional” and “backward,” all terms which suggest not only inefficiency, but also an inability for self-rule or “individualism.” These
characteristics are antithetical to the rational, enlightened, modern man and as such justify measures like colonization and later modernization and development schemes which would purportedly facilitate “enlightenment,” productivity and efficiency. Race maps onto these relations such that task-orientation was perceived in the modern world view as an inherent characteristic of racialized subjects. Although this racialized cartography resulted from the colonial imposition of Europeans on non-Western groups, it was used to legitimate the colonial project. That is, because people who engaged in task-orientated work were perceived as inferior to European capitalists because they were “inefficient,” unproductive” and “primitive”, their “backwardness” became an excuse for colonization. Further, as non-self-possessing subjects they were not perceived as “individuals,” a perception which further justified their colonization by European imperialists.

Chakrabarty links race to historicist explanations of development by discussing the views of John Stuart Mill on giving Indians or Africans self-rule:

Historicism—and even the modern European idea of history—one might say, came to the non-European peoples in the nineteenth century as somebody’s way of saying “not yet” to somebody else…According to Mill, Indians or Africans were not yet civilized enough to rule themselves. Some historical time of development and civilization (colonial rule and education, to be precise) had to elapse before they could be considered prepared for such a task. Mill’s historicist argument thus consigned Indians, Africans, and other “rude” nations to an imaginary waiting room of history. In doing so, it converted history itself into a version of this waiting room. We were all headed for the same destination Mill averred, but some people were to arrive earlier than others.

The “uneven development” or stagist theory of progress that Chakrabarty (through Mill) is invoking reproduces a “first in the west and then in the rest” perspective which assigns some cultures to the waiting room of modern time and allows passage to others. This view reifies cultural “difference” as a fixed, essential characteristic of each
group based on their geographic location. Thus, Indians and Africans are seen as not yet possessing the necessary temporal ontology for entrance into modernity. They are, therefore, ontologically pre-modern. By contrast, Western cultures are modern because they have made the ontological and epistemological shift. What is important to recognize about this relationship is that in order for the “West” to demonstrate its modern and “developed” status, it needed to identify less developed groups with which to compare itself.

In his discussion of “Orientalism”, Edward Said (1978) has described the comparative process whereby subjects are simultaneously racialized and defined in geographic and temporal terms as “backward” or “pre-modern.” According to Said, “Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between “the Orient” and (most of the time) “the Occident.”¹³ Key to this distinction is that the “Orient” is not a geographically and culturally fixed “truth,” but rather, a representation of the Western idea of “the Orient” in which “the imaginative examination of things Oriental was based more or less exclusively upon a sovereign Western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality an Oriental world emerged, first according to general ideas about who or what was an Oriental, then according to a detailed logic governed not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desires.”¹⁴

The battery of desires marshaled by the West was not only meant to describe and define the “Orient” as epistemological “truth”, but also, by contrast, to describe and define the West as not “Oriental” and therefore superior. Said writes, “Orientalism is never far from what Denis Hay has called the idea of Europe, a collective notion of

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¹³ Said, Edward, 1978, p.2
identifying “us” Europeans as against all “those” non-Europeans, and indeed it can be argued that the major component in European culture is precisely what made that culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe: the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures.” Through its description of the (albeit imagined) “Orient,” the “West” defines what and where it imagines itself to be, as well.

In the Orientalist imaginary “the West” and “the rest” can be identified as discrete epistemological entities spatially separated, but joined by their existence in a single historical time. Those that are in “the rest” are assigned a pre-modern or less developed ontology which becomes visible through their racialized bodies, and “inefficient” economic and political culture. As Said informs,

along with all other peoples variously designated as backward, degenerate, uncivilized and retarded, the Orientals were viewed in a framework constructed out of biological determinism and moral-political admonishment. The Oriental was linked thus to elements in Western society (delinquents, the insane, women, the poor) having in common an identity best described as lamentably alien.\(^{15}\)

Within the modern world view, space and race come together at the site of the Oriental subject whose purportedly pre-modern subjectivity, as determined within a singular, homogenous time, is written on his racialized material body.

The relationship in which particular bodies are produced as “other” through a connection between geographic space, race and time was mapped onto black bodies as well. In her text, *Black Body: Women, Colonialism and Space*, Radhika Mohanram describes a cartography in which “raced bodies, nations, ideas about places, passports and visas…are inextricably linked” in order to affirm the identity of “unmarked” or white

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\(^{15}\) Said 1978, p.207.
male bodies.\textsuperscript{16} Through an analysis of the work of John Locke, she argues that there is an idealized body which functions as a norm facilitating “distinctions between the different sorts of human beings and their different bodies.” In this context, the black body “functions to give perspective to the white man.”\textsuperscript{17} Drawing from the work of Frantz Fanon, she explains that “if the black man is a construction connoting the body, and the black epidermis a fictive representation composed of a thousand details and anecdotes, blackness is also the constitutive condition, enabling Western epistemology as well as Western ontology.” In the words of Fanon, “…what is often called the black soul is a white man’s artifact.”\textsuperscript{18}

The temporal distinction used to racialize and differentiate premodern, less developed and developed populations was mapped onto geographic space which beginning in the eighteenth century was primarily divided into nation-states.\textsuperscript{19} Despite the lack of empirical evidence, many people believe that there is a natural, primary and permanent link between particular populations and national identity. Nonetheless, as Hobsbawm’s (1990) discussion on the development of nations shows, there is no primordial connection between people and the geographic space they occupy. Rather, as he says, “I would stress the element of artifact, invention and social engineering which enters into the making of nations. Nations as a natural, God-given way of classifying men, as an inherent…political destiny, are a myth; nationalism which sometimes takes pre-existing cultures and turns them into nations, sometimes invents them, and often

\textsuperscript{16} Monhamram 1999, p.4.
\textsuperscript{17} Mohanram 1999, p.26
\textsuperscript{19} Hobsbawm 1990, p.3.
obliterates pre-existing cultures: that is a reality.”20 One of the ways to perpetuate this myth is through the perpetuation of historicist narratives which erase the previously obliterated pre-existing cultures from the national identity and replace them with an “imagined community” (Anderson 1993). For this reason, as Nicholas B. Dirks explains, there is an irrevocable link between history and the nation-state.21 He writes, “history has played a key role in the modern production of the nation-state and the various constituent bases of nationality, at the same time that the nation has played a critical historical role in defining what a modern conception of history should be.” The result is “the spatialization of historical time…which transforms a part of terrestrial space into a place of historical life for people.”22

Radhika Mongia (1999) takes issue with “the privileged relation between people and literal territory” which is prescribed within the historicist views of the nation. Calling this relationship “culturalist racism,” she argues that national frontiers not only serve to congeal boundaries around territories and populations, but more importantly these national demarcations serve to keep cultural “others” out of “white” territory. Through a discussion of the migration of small groups of Indians to Australia and Canada in the first decade of the twentieth century, she shows how white settler colonies and European nations implemented the passport as a means to deny Indian immigration. As she explains, Indians were denied access to these regions due to cultural reasons. Citing the fact that “the transfer of any people from a tropical climate to a northern one…must of necessity result in much physical suffering and danger to health” and the fact that the caste system renders them unfit for the hard work they would encounter, Canadian

21 Dirks, Nicholas B. 1990.
officials determined that Indian immigrants would represent more of a burden than a benefit to the nation. As a result of this cultural racism, according to Mongia, “The passport emerges...as a state document that purports to assign a national identity rather than a racial identity—a mechanism that would conceal race and racist motivations for controlling mobility in the guise of a reciprocal arrangement between states described as national.” Mongia concludes her discussion by saying that “the development of modern racism and the modern state are thus coproduced in such a way as to nationalize state-territorial boundaries, which are explicitly racist.” Thus, race, space and nation come together within a historicist narrative to produce and justify national “similarity” and its seeming opposite, cultural “difference.”

What made this cultural “difference” possible was the sense of an inclusive imagined community which as much as it contributed to a sense of inclusion among national citizens forcibly excluded those who were perceived as not sharing the community characteristics. Benedict Anderson (1993) explains that national histories were seen as belonging to those people who shared common cultural traits practiced within a single time. According to Anderson, the imagined linkage providing a sense of belonging derives from two obliquely related sources: the newspaper and the book. “The calendrical coincidence provided by the date at the top of the newspaper, the single most important emblem on it, provides the essential connection—the steady onward clocking of homogenous, empty time.” For him, the newspaper is merely an extreme form of the book in which one reader “is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is

confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion." The obsolescence on the morrow of its printing is what assures the mass ceremony of newspaper reading on a daily, and even hourly, basis. This, according to Anderson, is what not only made hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people aware of belonging to a nationally imagined community, it is also what gave them the sense that only they belonged.  

National belonging was reinforced by the idea that others existed in a synchronic or parallel time where spaces and events could be geographically distant, but joined through a common time. Anderson gives an example of how the new American versions of old toponyms such as New York, Nueva Leon and Nouvelle Orléans were understood synchronically, where the ‘new’ and the ‘old’ coexist within empty, homogenous time. He writes, “this new synchronic novelty could arise historically only when substantial groups of people were in a position to think of themselves as living lives parallel to those of other groups of people-if never meeting, yet certainly proceeding along the same [temporal] trajectory.” Singular time became a container for parallel, but not overlapping, events and spaces. This meant that populations could see their lives in relation to, but not dependent upon people and events in other parts of the world. The lack of interdependence reinforced the singularity of each nation making possible the development of a singular national history as distinct from other national histories. Thus national “difference” was facilitated by empty, homogenous time.

As a result, nations, as autonomous entities, became the means to differentiate groups whose progress could be compared across space and in the same time. Although national progress has often been defined in terms of industry or economics, what is

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26 Anderson 1983, p.35.
27 Anderson, 1983, p.44.
28 Anderson, 1983, p.188.
underlying is a judgment of cultural progress. As Thompson’s essay shows, “modern” labourers judge more than the kind of work task-oriented workers do, they judge how they do their work. That is, whether they have adopted the ideals of the Enlightenment such as rationality, scientific thinking and individuality. Their industrial nature, more than the nature of their industry, is therefore being judged and measured by singular time. Hence it is cultural progress under the guise of economic, technical, administrative and political progress that is of concern to the Western observer.

**The problem with historicism**

Historicism takes the West as center and referent for all other action across the globe. It assumes a measurement of progress in which those who have not yet arrived into modernity, as defined by their cultural progress within a singular time, could eventually get there when and if they adopt the necessary characteristics as put forth by the West. Among these criteria are rationality, self-possession, and separation from nature. The criteria for “arrival,” however, are defined by and measured against terms external to the social and cultural context of non-Western people. This external imposition occurs both in the epistemological realm where knowledges from the West ignore and overshadow other local knowledges, and also in the ontological realm where non-Western people are assigned a pre-modern ontology while being offered a modern or “model” ontology to aspire to without consideration of their own ontological or epistemological orientations.

Historicism was used by Westerners to justify the West’s presumed cultural superiority. As postcolonial scholars have shown there never was a universal modern world view. Rather, there have always been multiple world views and logics which the Western world view erased or ignored in order to gain and reinforce cultural hegemony.
An example of such an erasure is made available in Partha Chatterjee’s (1993) critique of Anderson’s “Imagined Community.” He objects to Anderson’s proposition that nationalisms in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from predetermined Western forms modeled on those in Europe and the Americas. He writes,

If nationalisms in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain “modular” forms already available to them by Europe and the Americas, what do they have left to imagine? History it would seem, has decreed that we in the postcolonial world shall only be perpetual consumers of modernity. Europe and the Americas, the only true subjects of history, have thought out on our behalf not only the script of colonial enlightenment and exploitation, but also that of our anticolonial resistance and postcolonial misery. Even our imaginations must remain forever colonized.²⁹

His critique of Anderson’s historicist view of national history is based on the differences from and resistances to the European and American models he has encountered in Asian and African nationalist projects. What Chaterjee calls for, in contrast, is the decolonization of the imaginations of the colonial subjects in order that both the hegemonic project of nationalist modernity and the numerous fragmented resistances to that normalizing project are apparent. Otherwise, the imagined community as Anderson conceives it erases postcolonial people as creators and authors of other times and other histories.

Post-colonial scholars have taken issue with the modern world view on other counts, as well. They claim that not all of the modern world shares the belief in secular time. Indeed, as Seth (2004) argues, there have always been many, quite possibly a majority, of the world’s population whose world is peopled by gods who act in and on the world and whose agency must be registered in any account of the world, just as there are people whose temporality as it is lived allows for their dead ancestors to directly

²⁹ Chaterjee 1993, p.5.
intervene in their affairs.\textsuperscript{30} Chakrabarty echoes Seth by insisting on the continued importance of the gods in India where he says a disenchanted world is unthinkable. What these scholars are pointing to is the multiple world views which exist next to and in relation to the modern world view. As they’ve shown, all time is not secular. Therefore, empty, homogenous time can not and should not be used as the Archimedean point from which populations are measured and compared.

If time is not secular, then there are histories beyond the singular narrative of the nation which includes actors and practices beyond the purview of this narrow world view. According to other contemporary world views, gods, spirits, animals, insects and other non-human actors all have a key role to play in creating the present moment. For example, in \textit{Rule of Experts}, Timothy Mitchell (2002) asks if the mosquito can speak. His implied question, riffing off of Gayatri Spivak, is whether non-human agents can also be significant social agents.\textsuperscript{31} Indeed, he shows to what extent the \textit{Anopheles Gambiae}, a mosquito native to sub-Saharan Africa, has affected the social and cultural progress of Egyptians and Westerners alike. The implications of his argument are that man is not the only subject of history, and therefore, there are many ways to tell “his”-story. If this is so, then Western historicist narratives are only one of many ways to recount the past, discuss the present and predict the future.

Views that see the gods, insects or animals as significant actors in daily life have either been ignored or translated into the terms of modernity by a hegemonic world view. Hence the role of these non-human actors is relegated to the realm of myth and superstition which reinforces the relationship between race, space and nation. Those

\textsuperscript{30} Seth, 2004.
\textsuperscript{31} Spivak, 1988.
groups that hold these actors as central are defined by the West as pre-modern, backward and therefore unassimilable to the modern “developed” world. They are seen as not possessing the potential or the desire to develop into modernity because they have not adopted the Western world view which makes man the subject of history and the author of his own life. Because the premoderns or “less developed” populations were held to be lacking the necessary characteristics to narrate their own existence, modern man took it upon himself to narrate their past for them, at the same time narrating his role into that past. Anderson’s modular nationalism, said to have emanated from the West and adopted in the “the rest,” serves as an example of this Western historicist narrative at work.

Historian Eric Hobsbawm (1987) explains, due to pervasive racism, colonial peoples were always excluded from national history whether on their own soil or that of their colonizers. He writes, “And yet, even within the zone of white skins, there was a striking contradiction between the offer of unlimited assimilation to anyone who proved his or her willingness and ability to join the nation-state and the rejection of some groups in practice.”32 Hobsbawm specifically cites the case of the Indian rajah in Britain. He explains that, “no amount of assimilation would turn men with dark skins into ‘real’ Englishmen, Belgians or Dutchmen, even if they had as much money and noble blood and as much taste for sports as the European nobility.”33 In the case of the United States, he explains that the systematization of race prejudice “was to be found among the native, white, preferably Protestant Anglophone-born middle and upper classes which…invented their own heroic nativist myth of the white Anglo-Saxon…”34 What is apparent from these examples is that whether Anglo bodies traveled into (albeit invented) racialized

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33 Hobsbawm 1987, p.152.
territories or racialized bodies moved into (mythical) white territories, the “privileged relation between people and literal territory” was upheld. This has implications for the inscription of cultural “difference” on Mexican nationals in the United States as will be discussed in the next section.

In this section I have argued that secular time and the emergence of the individual have contributed to a modern world view in which history as empty and homogenous is used to measure cultural “difference” between people in different regions. I have suggested that race and nation are central categories through which the modern world view has circulated and that their inscription on bodies has been used to legitimate the colonization of and discrimination against non-white populations. I concluded with the idea that the relationship between race and nation as markers of cultural “difference” is upheld even when people travel away from the land to which they are held to be naturally linked. In the following section I discuss how the modern world view permeates the current debates on immigration in the United States. I suggest that underlying these debates is a conception of time as empty and homogenous through which race and nation are used to reinforce the purported cultural “difference” between United States and Mexican nationals. I conclude by suggesting transnationalism as a means for reconstituting the discourse of cultural “difference” and in the process re-inscribing historical narratives within different temporalities.


*Immigration policies are not simply reflections of whom we regard as potential Americans, they are vehicles for keeping out those who do not fit the image and welcoming those who do.*

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35 Ong Hing 2004, pp.2
The immigration debate in the United States is divided into two sides. On one side are those who believe that immigration should be restricted, or at least greatly reduced. I call them restrictionists because their primary goal is to restrict the in-flow of immigration no matter what. Social conservatives, traditionalists and “paleoconservatives” make up this camp. They see immigrants as corrupting national cohesion and as unassimilable to the national ethos. Their concern is that the increased presence of Mexicans is disrupting labor markets, linguistic patterns, and cultural, social and political institutions all at a cost to “American” citizens and the “American” nation. The underlying fear is that, in the words of Samuel Huntington, “they no longer feel the need to assimilate to “American” culture because they are so numerous.”\(^\text{36}\)

On the other side are those who believe that immigration should be regulated but at levels that reflect the reality of both emigration pressures outside the country and labor needs within it.\(^\text{37}\) I call this second group assimilationists because they recognize the possibility for immigrants to assume some or all of the characteristics of the national ethos whether economic, cultural, political or social. Groups on this side of the debate are often called pro-immigrant or open borders lobby because they support continued immigration in some form. Members of this camp include an unlikely combination of groups such as the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF), the National Immigration Forum and National Council of La Raza (NCLR), as well as neoliberal Republicans, Radical Greens and Libertarians.

Greatly influencing the current immigration debate is the specter of immigrant-perpetrated terrorism on U.S. soil. Since September 11, 2001 immigrants and terrorists

\(^{36}\) Huntington 2004.
\(^{37}\) Barry, 2005, p. 28
have been increasingly conflated as a threat to national security. This conflation has led to enhancement of the most utilized anti-immigrant and anti-terrorist intervention: “control through deterrence.” This intervention strategy came out of the Clinton administration as a solution for dealing with increased border crossing, but has included such strategies as denying public services to immigrants through legislation such as Proposition 187 in California, Proposition 200 in Arizona and Clinton’s Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, as well as unauthorized worksite raids across the country including in non-border states (Ong Hing 2004) and heightened border enforcement strategies such as Operation Gatekeeper (Nevis 2002). Most recently this has included the introduction of legislation to build a 700 mile fence between the two countries.

The increased concern with stemming terrorist activities in the United States has led to greater enforcement not only of the geographic, but also the cultural boundaries of the nation. Hence, George W. Bush has outlined a position stating that you’re either with “us” or for “them.”38 The “them,” however, can be any perceived cultural “other.” Thus armed Minutemen patrolling the border and New York City drivers running down U.S. citizens of Pakistani origin39 become legitimate forms of policing the cultural boundaries of the nation. As Tom Barry, an associate of the Americas Program of the Interhemispheric Relations Center (IRC), has pointed out, “the them-versus-us framework that the Bush administration has superimposed on its counterterrorism strategy has tapped into some of the most base sentiments in the U.S. society.”40 Among the sentiments are its racist characterization of foreigners and their societies, its

38 Barry, 2005, p. 28
39 See Ong Hing 2004 for this example and many others like it.
40 Barry, 2005, p. 28
isolationism and U.S.-centric view of international affairs, an underlying fear of losing its power and privilege, but most importantly its sense of moral and cultural superiority. These base sentiments are fueled by a sense of superiority of U.S. culture and values which paints those who appear (phenotypically, culturally and economically) to adhere to the national Anglo Protestant culture as superior to those who are perceived to undermine this purported cultural cohesion.

Discussions on immigration in the United States have historically revolved around two questions. The first is how many immigrants to let in and the second is how we decide who they should be. These concerns converge around the question of national identity. Who will we be if we let in more or fewer Europeans as opposed to more or fewer Asians? How many and which of each group should we allow and which should we reject? What kind of an impact will the influx of new migrants have on the cultural core of the United States? What will their economic contributions be and what will they take away? In sum, debates on immigration have centered on the idea that who we let in reflects who we are, and will be as a nation. In deciding which people to accept and which to exclude, “Americans” engage in a process of self-definition.

I argue that undergirding all sides of the immigration debate is the question of whether or not Mexican migrants are culturally developed enough to contribute to the national ethos. Will they hinder the economic, social and cultural progress of the nation if allowed unrestricted entry? This fear is only superficially about whether they will commit bioterrorism. What such concerns mask is a cultural racism which is concerned with whether they will contribute to the developed status of the U.S. or undermine it with their “inferior” cultural characteristics such as operating on task-oriented rather than clock

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41 Barry, 2005, p.28.
time, or as Huntington charges, refusing to intermarry, practicing Catholicism rather than Protestantism, and maintaining their “native” language. The question of their potential contributions to national progress only becomes relevant in a context where “other” cultures are considered inferior because “less developed.” A modern world view has provided the parameters for defining progress at the expense of those it defines in opposition to itself. The national narrative of “American” superiority and exceptionalism must be continually reinforced in order to justify the exclusion of migrants from this narrative and to legitimize their treatment as inferior. It must wipe away other histories, other temporal and spatial orientations in order to reinforce its own as singular and superior. Importantly, it must ignore their contributions which in many ways have made the nation what it is.

Immigrant groups that are coming into the U.S. currently are predominantly from Asia and Latin America, particularly Mexico. This is a shift from other historical periods when immigration was largely from Europe. Although there is less immigration now than at other historical periods, the “threat” is said to come from the high numbers of one group rather than the overall number of immigrants. Since Mexicans make up the largest group of immigrants, it is feared that they will disrupt the cultural cohesion of the nation by not learning English, and not adopting the Protestant ethic, both of which would hinder the advancement of the nation.  

Cultural racism is used to demonstrate the purported unwillingness or inability of Mexicans to assimilate to the imagined American community. They have been blamed

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42 The Catholic background of Mexicans can no longer be taken for granted. For example, at least one third of Bush supporters in 2004 were Protestant Latinos. See “A Latin Power Surge,” *Newsweek*, May 30, 2005, Pp.27. In that same issue of *Newsweek* there is also an article about how young Latinos, “want to be spoken to in English, even as they stay true to their Latino identity.” p.30.
for overuse of social services in comparison to their economic and social contributions. They are framed as criminals and lawless bandits who smuggle drugs and bodies across the border. Political arguments against them contend that they don’t exercise their political vote to better the U.S., but instead pay attention to political, economic and social development in Mexico. They are reputed to have a “mañana” attitude which is said to inform a work ethic more akin to Thompson’s task-oriented time than the clock time of the industrious and modern United States. “Latino time” is often used to describe the tardiness and inefficient use of time by Mexicans. One of the most predominant arguments against them, however, is their low education rates and lack of employment skills as compared to other immigrant groups. All of these “unenlightened” qualities make them less desirable as possible citizens of the United States. Contradictorily, they have been defined as only coming to the United States to work. Indeed, much of the decision about whether to allow them permission to come is based on the fact that they do the work that many “Americans” don’t want to do. This means that at some level they have embraced the work ethic that Huntington argues is central to the national culture. Unfortunately, rather than being recognized for their work initiative, the fact that Mexicans will do work that “Americans” won’t, further de-humanizes them in the eyes of some and justifies their perceived cultural inferiority.

Traditionally, the United States has considered itself to be a nation of immigrants. However, it has also considered itself to be a nation with a cohesive culture based on the identities of the first settlers (and not, ironically, on the identities of those already living within what is now considered to be “American” territory). Therefore, despite the immigration of people from all over the world to the United States, it has continued to
think of itself as possessing an Anglo-Protestant cultural core (Huntington 2004, Brimelow 1995, Takaki 1979). Indeed, because of this idea the immigration policies that have been implemented throughout the history of the United States have given preferential treatment to people of national origins who were seen to have a similar culture. This means that immigration policy has been based on exclusionary policies and discriminatory practices against those groups who were held to be farther away from the national cultural norm and were thought to do more to undermine rather than advance the progress of the nation. The rejected groups included not only criminals, paupers and prostitutes, but also those immigrant groups held to have cultural characteristics antithetical to national advancement such as Asians and Latin Americans, as well as those groups that were already living in the U.S. such as African and African American slaves and indigenous peoples.

Due to this perception, immigration debates since the inception of the United States have been riddled with racial epithets and cultural attacks against these groups who were often defined as savage, backward, ignorant and generally unassimilable. Given the heightened anti-immigrant sentiment pervasive in the United States today though, even when Mexican migrants try to assimilate, cultural racism inhibits their integration. Tom Barry explains, “Even longtime migrant residents, integrated into daily life on all levels but the formal one, will face renewed hostility in their own homes. As immigration restrictionists advance their agenda, the very act of assimilation that they demand of immigrants will become increasingly impossible.”

By restricting Mexicans from legal citizenship or from receiving public services in the United States this discourse works to keep Mexicans in a position of economic and physical need, a position which infantilizes

43 Barry, 2005, p.31.
them vis à vis the seemingly independent and progressive U.S. citizenry. It produces Mexicans as dependent, a characteristic which discriminatory public policies propose as an a priori characteristic. In this context, they are prevented from achieving that which is asked of them because they are constantly relegated to a pre-modern spatiotemporal zone through legislation such as Propositions 187 in California and 200 in Arizona, or through racist economic, political or social practices. Their development is perceived as stunted, while in fact it is the world view which sees them as backward and ignorant that prevents their “progress” even as it obscures their contributions to the continued development of the nation.

Historicist assimilation narratives perform an equally infantilizing trick by creating an imagined place of arrival whereby a Mexican migrant will achieve modern status once he has demonstrated full assimilation. Assimilation assumes a historical teleology where the migrant emerges from the waiting room of history to enter into the “modern” world--he comes out of the past and into the present. Until he has achieved this mythical norm, however, he is seen as still developing through the stages of progress and not having arrived into modernity-- like a child with the potential to become an adult but not having fully developed yet. If we take Huntington at his word when he says that Mexicans no longer feel the need to assimilate, it would seem that fewer and fewer Mexicans are choosing to assimilate, which can only mean that they are choosing to stay pre-modern. Their increasing presence in the United States is worrisome within this world view because they seem not only to be hindering their own progress, but also to be stemming the national development of the United States.
Homogenous time is what allows for this concern with both national and cultural progress. It is what makes the Mexican migrant appear to be inferior because of their ontological and epistemological “backwardness.” The fear is that if left to their own devices, Mexicans would corrupt U.S. identity and that would undermine national cohesion. These arguments are historicist insofar as they assume that the United States is a cohesive and progressive composite that could be corrupted at some future moment. They rely both on singular time as measure of cultural “difference”, but also on singular and distinct histories which assume national fixity of the U.S. citizen and the Mexican migrant rather than seeing their identities as dynamic, complex, multiple, and importantly, mutually constitutive.

In his book, *Alien Nation: Common Sense about America’s Immigration Disaster*, Peter Brimelow (1995) provides a historicist narrative of the political formation of the United States. I reproduce it below as an example of the predominant Anglo view of national history.

- **1607** First permanent settlement at Jamestown, Virginia
- **1620** Puritan settlement at Plymouth, Massachusetts (The “Open Door Era”—Immigration actually regulated by colonies, later states, until 1875, with object of keeping out criminals, paupers and occasionally other groups considered undesirable, such as Irish servants.)
- **1776** Declaration of Independence (After Revolutionary War, immigration remains low until the late 1830’s-the “First Great Lull”)
- **1790** First federal naturalization law requires that applicants be “free white persons”
- **1808** Importation of slaves halted
- **1840s** Irish immigration, especially after potato crop fails in late 1840s, begins “Era of Mass Immigration” lasting until 1921 cutoff. Initially from northern and western Europe.
- **1868** Blacks finally guaranteed U.S. citizenship under Fourteenth Amendment
- **1875** U.S. Supreme Court rules immigration federal, not state, responsibility
- **1882-1917** Chinese, Japanese and other Asian immigration effectively stopped as it materializes; Asians substantially barred from U.S. citizenship.
- **1890-1920** “New Immigration” from southern, eastern Europe, builds up to “First Great Wave,” peaking at 1.3 million in 1907.
1921-1924 The “Great Restriction”—Quota Act of 1921, Immigration Act of 1924, sharply reduce immigration and, through a system of national-origins quotas, cause it to reflect the ethnic heritage of the existing American community, predominantly northern and western European.

1940s Last restrictions on Asians acquiring U.S. citizenship dropped; limited immigration from Asia begins.

1952 The Immigration and Nationality Act—previously legislation consolidated, national-origins quota system extended.

1954 Rising illegal immigration effectively stopped by “Operation Wetback.”

1965 The Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments—immigration increased; national-origins principle abolished; “family reunification” emphasized above skills needed by American economy. Not a move back toward free immigration—instead a complex, inflexible and perversely discriminatory system. (1965 legislation inadvertently triggers mass immigration, but heavily skewed toward a few Third World countries, thus shifting U.S. ethnic balance. Not an Open Door—rather, because of this skew, the “Era of Open Scuttles.”)

1970s Illegal immigration rising


1990s (Immigration policy brings about “Second Great Wave”—a record 1.8 million admitted in 1991; illegal immigration also running at 300,00 to 500,00 net each year.)

Brimelow’s history demonstrates an empty, homogenous time where immigrant groups were excluded from or incorporated into the “American” nation at different historical periods. Through this timeline we see the development of the United States on a singular continuum in which the nation forms its cohesion by repeatedly deciding who it should and should not be through immigration policies and legislation. Like a container in which items can be placed or removed, the timeline makes national history seem open, even as the legislative events which it outlines have been overdetermined both by racist domestic and foreign policy. Nothing is said about why these immigrants come or why they are included or excluded at any given moment. Its linear form makes national
history seem to be something which naturally occurred over time even as it shows how discriminatory the policies were which informed its development.

As Brimelow’s history shows, extensive energy has gone into crafting and upholding legislation which reinforces the Anglo-Protestant core that Huntington and other conservatives claim has been central and natural, to “American” identity for three centuries.\footnote{Huntington, 2004, Foreward.} What is shocking about Brimelow’s book is that it is staunchly anti-immigrant, even though Brimelow himself is an immigrant to the United States and despite the fact that his history of immigration legislation shows the racist and discriminatory lengths to which the U.S. has gone to exclude immigrants. His anti-immigrant politics is less remarkable when considered through the modern world view where certain populations, defined according to race and nation, are naturalized as inferior or “less developed” and as a result are denied access to the nation. While Brimelow claims that it is the policies which have caused the immigration “problem,” a point I don’t disagree with him on, I see the “problem” as one of reinforcing an “imagined” community that has neither reflected the cultural diversity of that community nor considered the contributions of marginalized groups in its formation. Brimelow sees policy as causing mass immigration of “unassimilable” populations, as if a predisposition to assimilation were an inherent cultural characteristic of certain groups and not others. He is not alone in this belief as Huntington’s discussion of “the Hispanic Challenge” and the current military and legislative efforts to curb Mexican migration demonstrate. I, on the other hand, see policy as one of the strategies for producing the “difference” which defines populations as “unassimilable.” Thus, for me, the inherent characteristic
determining “assimilability” lies within the policy system and the racist beliefs which define and uphold it, rather than with the groups who immigrate to the United States.

Because the immigration debates rely on a historicist national narrative, only certain histories are revealed. For example, Huntington gives an example of Mexicans at a soccer game in Los Angeles. He says, “they booed when ‘The Star Spangled Banner’ was played; they pelted the U.S. players with debris and cups of what might have been water, beer or worse; and they attacked with fruit and cups of beer a few fans who tried to raise an American flag.” Their support of Mexico can only be read in one way by Huntington—as a rejection of “Americanness.” He asserts, “As their numbers increase, Mexican-Americans feel increasingly comfortable with their own culture and often contemptuous of American culture.” His singular national history establishes an unnecessary binary which requires that all immigrants reject their national origin by assimilating or that they reject the “American” identity choosing instead to degrade it.

He elaborates on the binary explaining that in contrast to the fans at the Los Angeles soccer game, “past immigrants wept with joy when, after overcoming hardship and risk, they saw the Statue of Liberty; enthusiastically identified themselves with their new country that offered them liberty, work, and hope; and often became the most intensely patriotic of citizens.” The enthusiastic patriots of yesteryear seemingly chose to surrender their ties to their nation of origin and in doing so, to become culturally Anglo-Protestant and nationally “American.” The difficulty with Huntington’s assessment is that, according to him, previous migrants underwent a complete cultural transformation by shedding all ties to their own histories and all cultural characteristics.

45 Huntington 2004 p. 5.
46 Huntington, 2004, p.5.
47 Huntington 2004, p.5.
from their own nation in order to adopt the new culture and history of their present. Thus by crossing a geographic border, they also crossed a temporal boundary. Past immigrants made the move into modernity, as opposed to current Mexican migrants who seemingly refuse the transformation. To accept his argument, however, is to truly dwell in the realm of imagination. We must believe that people are compartmentalizable and quantifiable entities who can drop one identity and assume another without any overlap between or within them. We must believe that national identity, whether from the country of origin or the receiving country, is homogenous and that once people cross the geographic threshold of the “American” nation, they leave their own histories and become part of the national narrative of the United States without influencing the presumed cultural core. Finally, we must believe there is such a thing as a temporal continuum of progress in which populations develop.

Brimelow’s timeline shows how this historicist view is possible insofar as immigrant histories begin at the moment they come into the United States. Indeed, immigrants only become “immigrants” once they have come to the U.S. Importantly, however, the U.S. as imagined community is only possible when it is defined over against “immigrants.” This lens provides a Manichean view of national identity and culture distinguishing “assimilated” from “unassimilated, “us” from “them.” Thus it becomes possible to say, as one fan at the soccer game did in reaction to the unruly Mexico fans, “Something’s wrong when I can’t even raise a flag in my own (my emphasis) country.”48 If the distinction between the two countries were as simple as the “American” fan would have it, there would be no need to police the national and cultural boundaries of the United States because it would be obvious who was “in” and who was

48 Huntington 2004, p.5.
“out.” This is brought into stark relief by the response this fan was given from a Los Angeles Times reporter who said, “playing in Los Angeles is not a home game for the United States.” Given this ambiguity, Huntington’s view of a static and bounded us/them binary, and cultural essentializing in general, as a defining parameter for debating immigration has serious limitations.

Homogenous time facilitates the unproblematic distinction between the two countries as if their histories had no overlap or intersection. U.S. citizens can draw on “their” singular national history in which they live lives parallel to the Mexicans without realizing the interdependence between the two nations. This synchronic existence perpetuates the myth that each nation, and by extension its people, is responsible for and maintains its own national history. As in Anderson’s example of the new and old national spaces, each national history is singular with no cross-over. They exist simultaneously joined only through their connection in homogenous, empty time. Therefore, the economic and social policies emanating from the U.S. which force immigration from Mexico are left out of this debate. Huntington blames the Mexican presidents Fox and Salinas De Gortari for declaring the need for open borders between Mexico and the U.S. What he neglects to say is that this is in response to trade agreements between the two countries which benefit U.S. companies at the expense of the Mexican people. The memory of territories owned by Mexico but claimed by the U.S. is erased in favor of a narrative that claims a timeless Anglo-Protestant history for the nation. Economic policies such as NAFTA which have driven many Mexicans off of their land and across the nebulous U.S.-Mexico border seem unrelated, but coincidental events. Most
importantly, the contributions of Mexico and Mexican workers to the “development” and “progress” of the United States is overlooked.

A material site where the binary is the most visible is the border. The border represents both the site for the negotiation of histories, but also the call for representation of multiple groups and world views in those histories. This can be seen clearly in the current stand-off between the Minutemen and those that are protesting them at the border in Arizona and California. These contestations are manifested on multiple levels. The most visible of these is the discursive battle being waged with posters. Those supporting Mexican migrants hold signs that read, “We didn’t cross the border, the border crossed us.” Countering this claim are signs that read, “Mexicans go home!”

From the singular historical perspective, undocumented Mexicans are trespassing on U.S. territory and should go back to their country. However, from another perspective, one which reclaims not only stolen land but the history of colonization and imperialism perpetrated against the Mexican people by the U.S., Mexicans residing at the border are and have always been, home. It is, therefore, the U.S. citizens who are trespassing. Thus, beyond the hand-held signs, the physical presence of Mexican nationals on the U.S. side of the border is in itself a contestation of the historical division between countries and of the singular narrative which makes that separation so real.

The protests at and over the border, then, are more than negotiations of territorial sovereignty; they are debates about recognition and the right to claim multiple histories and world views. As Kearney explains, “it is not territory per se that is being contested, but personal identities and movements of persons, and cultural and political hegemony of
peoples.” Nonetheless, they continue to be waged in the name of the nation. The Minutemen are claiming an Anglo-Protestant heritage which erases the Mexican claims to territory and national heritage. The protestors are responding with signs that claim the territory in and around the border as originally belonging to Mexico. It should be noted that both of their claims to a geographically-bound national heritage erase Native American claims to land and sovereignty. An equally problematic side of these debates is that no one is questioning the national distinctions between Mexico and U.S. or the historicist narratives which have made them historically separate entities and “their” people “differently developed.”

In these border stand-offs each side is concerned with whose partial form of identification will be allowed to stand as the singular historical narrative. Because they are rooted in nationalism they reinstate the historicist narrative which reifies each past and present as separate thus reinscribing the “us” vs. “them” view of the world. Contesting this narrative by reclaiming “forgotten” and erased national histories is a step, but one that risks further division, discrimination and ultimately, as we have already seen at the border in the last decade, deaths. Reinforcing the binaries rooted in national “difference” both justifies not having to care about the “other” because they are not one of “us,” and prevents the “other” from ever being seen as one of “us.” Because of this, I am concerned with ways to communicate across difference without perpetuating historicist narratives and restaking out the nation as determinant of developmental difference. How can we break down the binaries of modernity which rely on empty, homogenous time to reify national and cultural “difference” in such a way that their mutual constitution and dependence becomes clear?

Transnationalism and Cultural “Difference”

Despite the separation between the two countries, the national boundaries between Mexico and The United States are blurred. On the one hand, the geographic line between the two countries is being drawn more insistently and with greater fervor every day. On the other with 12 million Mexicans currently living in the United States and the remittances they send back home providing the second largest GNP in Mexico, the boundary is anything but clear. The fact that remittances from Mexican workers in the United States support the Mexican economy can be read from a paternalistic standpoint in which the U.S. not only helps the workers, but also supports their families in Mexico. However, this view elides the mutually constitutive histories which Mexico, the U.S. and their citizens have participated in and contributed to. Overlooking this fact perpetuates a “West to the rest” development perspective that makes Mexico and Mexicans passive rather than active agents in both Mexican and U.S. lives and histories. It also ignores the modernization schemes which were imposed on Mexico and actually hindered rather than helped economic progress in that nation while benefiting U.S. economic development.

Scholarship on transnationalism is complicating this self/other binary, making visible the ways in which communities in both nations are mutually constituted. Michael Kearney writes that “transnationalism implies a blurring or, perhaps better said, a reordering of the binary cultural, social, and epistemological distinctions of the modern period.”\(^{50}\) This is happening according to Basch et al (1994) through “processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement.”\(^{51}\) Smith and Guarnizo (1990) suggest that these

\(^{50}\) Kearney 1997, p.152.
\(^{51}\) Basch et al year, p.7.
processes are contributing to new social formations. They write that what is occurring is a situation “in which what has conventionally been seen as belonging within well-defined territorial boundaries (i.e. political institutions and practices as well as social and cultural relations) has spilled over national borders, producing something new, a social formation.”52 What these scholars are identifying is a new concept of space which can open up possibilities for other epistemological, social and national imaginings. In this re-imagined transnational territory, other temporalities can exist which disrupt the linear national narrative “subverting the rationale of the hegemonic moment and relocating alternative, hybrid sites of cultural negotiation.”53

These re-imaginings lead to counter-narratives like that of Nicholas De Genova (1998) who sees Mexico and the U.S. as “developing” in relation to each other. In his article, “Race, Space and the Reinvention of Latin American Chicago, he takes issue with the “dominant spatial ideologies that undergird a prevailing “common sense” about the U.S. and Latin America.” He explains that the relationship between Mexico and the United States has its origins in the history of invasion and conquest, warfare and subjugation, exploitation and oppression. Therefore, “it is possible (indeed, productive) to comprehend this history as one of unstable frontiers and violable boundaries, as one where space is not merely contiguous but colonized and, hence, coterminous.”54 For De Genova, there is no geographic stability between the United States and Mexico, and since neither can be claimed as a stable, knowable object, there is no epistemological stability between the two either. This means that the purported boundaries between the two countries are contingent and mutually constitutive. It also means that they must be

52 Smith and Guarnizo 1998, p.27.
53 Bhabha 1994, p.255.
constantly reproduced by mapping “difference” onto Mexican citizens in order to reinforce the purported cultural cohesion of the United States. As he explains, “the thematic of continuity and disjuncture is usually mapped onto the migrants themselves; either as outcasts or assimilators they come to represent a condition of displacement that reinscribes the stability and security of separate places.”

Because a cultural fixity has been assigned to Mexican migrants, there appears to be little option for them to contest the essentializing view which objectifies them within the terms provided, except to deny it. By denying the ontological essence imposed on them, they reject the stereotypes and labels used to describe them, but at the same time they accept the terms on which the accusations are made. That is, because they have been interpellated into the debate on cultural difference as established by the terms of the modern world view, i.e according to a binary of “us” vs. “them,” their options seem to be either embrace cultural fixity by claiming Mexican nationalism or deny it by embracing “American” nationalism. Remaining within the established terms of the debate, though, prevents them from narrating their own histories according to their hybrid and multiple identities.

Nonetheless, locating a zone of contestation is difficult within the hegemonic modern world view. According to Smith and Guarnizo, “the spaces available for forming non-essentialist identities, while not entirely absent, are interstitial—i.e., they open up between such dominant discursive venues as the “nation-state,” the “local community,” and the “ethno-racial community.”” However, as Homi Bhabha (1994) informs, these formations can not take place within the singular temporality of historicism. Rather, he

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suggests, “to reconstitute the discourse of cultural difference demands not simply a change of cultural contents and symbols [i.e. my territory not yours]; a replacement within the same time-frame is never adequate. It requires a radical revision of the social temporality in which emergent histories may be written, the rearticulation of the ‘sign’ in which cultural identities may be inscribed.” Transnationalism is a possible site for this re-visioning.

The presence of Mexican migrants in the United States calls into question the assumed homogeneity and stability of geography, epistemology, ontology and the historicist narrative which essentializes them. As De Genova informs, “Mexican migration to Chicago actively reworks and reproduces social space, such that Chicago and Mexico are implicated by one another.” Indeed, “the everyday life practices of migrant workers produce a living space in Chicago that conjoins it irreversibly to Mexico and renders it irretrievable for the U.S. nation-state.” Not only are the spaces called Mexico and the United States in doubt, but also the historical narrative which keeps them and their citizens geographically and epistemologically distinct is destabilized. As migrants move across spaces their presence disrupts singular national narratives and reconfigures world views. De Genova explains,

As migration experiences permeate the innumerable communities in Mexico in which migrants continue to participate and as “migrant knowledge” comes to reshape the worldview even of people who have never migrated, it becomes more difficult to disentangle what can be properly attributed to a social history purported to be Mexican and what to another is said to be that of the United States.  

57 Bhabha 1994, p.246.
Transnationalism has made more visible the historicist myth used to essentialize cultural “difference” and has been the staging ground for historical contingencies, disruptions and renegotiations. It provides a spatiotemporal zone where “the natural(ized), unifying discourse of ‘nation’, ‘peoples’, or authentic ‘folk’ tradition, those embedded myths of culture’s particularity, can not be readily referenced.”

Conclusion

Here I have attempted to briefly outline the ways in which the modern world view informs the debates on Mexican immigration to the United States. Through a discussion of the changes brought about in “modernity” I have argued that Huntington’s “us” and “them” are mutually dependent rather than mutually exclusive as he would have his readers believe, and that through transnational movements these mutual constitutions are becoming visible. I have suggested that transnationalism is forcing a re-negotiation of the terms upon which cultural “difference” has historically been established. While I have posited transnationalism as a possible zone of contestation, I have not provided adequate evidence from the perspective of the migrants themselves for how these cultural renegotiations are occurring, and to what extent they are disrupting the modern world view. It is my hope that my dissertation work will more directly engage this issue.

Postscript

To struggle against historicism, then, is to try and tell a different history of reason. European thought, and in particular European political thought which relies on individualism, scientific rationality, national sovereignty and universal time are

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60 Bhabha 1994, p.247.
inadequate to define all world views. There is no common denominator which can contain all human existence. Those that argue that universal logic is necessary to critique categories of modernity (Habermas, Marx, etc.) support their claims by showing that without understanding the overall system or logic you can not begin to undo it. While I agree with this view on the one hand, I find it limited because it universalizes and homogenizes everyone’s experience of modernity and assumes an ontological relativity in which all social actors despite historical moment or geographic location experience modernity the same. The parallel or equivalent experience is possible according to this view because given enough time, modernity will operate the same everywhere and will be received the same everywhere. This version does not account for contextual differences and particularities, however. The benefit to embracing a universal logic is that it reveals a dominant style of reasoning at work which needs to be exposed in order to be critiqued and undermined. The shortfall is that it elides particularity and situated knowledges (Haraway 1991).

There are those that would eschew the universals of modernity altogether, preferring instead to pay attention to contextual and historical specificity and particularity. This focus ignores the assumption of an ontological homogeneity at work undergirding much of Western thinking. Emphasizing the particular over the universal relativizes social and cultural situations making them equivalent despite differences in terms of colonialism, violence and exploitation which differing groups have been subjected to or have perpetrated. Reinforcing universals without paying attention to specificity and particularity relativizes everyone’s situation as equivalent and provides overly simplistic analytical frames for understanding social phenomena. On the other
hand, paying attention only to specific situations and their particulars renders invisible the larger ideological, political, economic, social and cultural forces which come into play in the movement of a group from their country of origin to another nation. A lens which keeps both the universals and the particulars in view will offer a more comprehensive understanding of human belonging.

In my dissertation work I will propose a third way: keep the universalizing categories of modernity on the table while also paying attention to specificity and particularity. This alternative allows for a critique of hegemonic patterns which are based in European Enlightenment thinking while also allowing room for different categories, logics and styles of reasoning to become visible, not in terms of how they measure up to the categories of modernity, but rather on their own terms. This requires that the people who live with “non-modern” world views not be measured according to the spatiotemporal yardstick of modernity. In positing this, I am neither proposing to brush away the assumed universals of modernity nor suggesting that there is an outside to modernity. Rather, I am suggesting that different world views are possible and do exist alongside and in relation to the modern world view, although they have been obscured or ignored by the hegemonic Western lens, as this paper has attempted to show.
References


