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JESÚS VELASCO GRAJALES

Lou Dobbs and the Rise of Modern Nativism

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Fax: 5727•9800 ext. 6314
Correo electrónico: publicaciones@cide.edu
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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyze Lou Dobbs' immigration perspective and to evaluate to what extent Dobbs can properly receive the designation nativist. Dobbs views, I argue, represent one of the clearest expressions of contemporary nativism, a perspective often shared by important sectors of the society and the Republican Party. His position fits perfectly with the main characteristics of nativism, and often bleeds into conspiracy theory. In the recent past, Dobbs has capitalized on American fears after September 11, blaming corporations, politicians, political parties and many other persons and institutions for problems currently faced by the United States. American foreign policy is in crisis, and Dobbs has offered an anti-immigration view, in many ways more extremists than that of radical right anti-immigrant organizations, as a diagnosis.

Resumen

El propósito de este artículo es analizar la perspectiva inmigratoria de Lou Dobbs y evaluar como éste puede recibir propiamente la designación del nativismo. Desde el punto de vista de Dobbs, su argumento representa una de las más claras expresiones del nativismo contemporáneo, una perspectiva también compartida por importantes sectores de la sociedad y del Partido Republicano. Su posición encaja perfectamente con las principales características del nativismo y algunas veces dentro de la teoría de conspiración. En el pasado reciente, Dobbs se ha capitalizado por los miedos de los norteamericanos después del 11 de septiembre, culpando corporaciones, políticos, partidos políticos y demás personas e instituciones por los problemas que actualmente enfrenta Estados Unidos. La política exterior norteamericana se encuentra en crisis y Dobbs ha ofrecido, como diagnóstico, un punto de vista antiinmigrante; en varias ocasiones mucho más extremista que algunos de los grupos radicales antiinmigrantes.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to analyze Lou Dobbs' immigration perspective and to evaluate to what extent Dobbs can properly receive the designation nativist. Dobbs views, I argue, represent one of the clearest expressions of contemporary nativism, a perspective often shared by important sectors of the society and the Republican Party. His position fits perfectly with the main characteristics of nativism, and often bleeds into conspiracy theory. In the recent past, Dobbs has capitalized on American fears after September 11, blaming corporations, politicians, political parties and many other persons and institutions for problems currently faced by the United States. American foreign policy is in crisis, and Dobbs has offered an anti-immigration view, in many ways more extremists than that of radical right anti-immigrant organizations, as a diagnosis.

To begin, I briefly describe some of the defining peculiarities of American nativism. I focus on demonstrating the differences between late 19th and early 20th century nativism and its contemporary counterpart, and explaining how Dobbs is representative of the current version. In the second section, I present the main characteristics of conspiracy theory, a central component of many nativist expressions. Third, based on the previous sections I analyze the main traits of Dobbs' anti-immigration views, highlighting his extremist position. Finally, I offer, some concluding remarks.

1. Nativism: A Rare Kind of Bug?

Historically, the United States has experienced a constant dilemma between welcoming people from other lands, or rejecting them. This love-hate dynamic has created what one scholar calls "a double helix of negative and positive attitudes that have existed throughout America's history."¹ Nativist expressions have varied in their form and emphasis over time.

Scholars have offered different definitions of nativism. Historian John Higham considers nativism "an intense opposition to an internal minority on the ground of its foreign (*i.e.*, 'un-American') connection."² For Higham, nativism is any type or degree of antipathy towards foreigners, their institutions and their ideas. The nativist, Higham asserts, believe that foreign influences threaten the nation. In his classic study, Higham sustains that "modern nationalism"³ is the internal force that invigorate all nativist

¹ Leo R. Chavez. *Covering Immigration: Popular Images and the Politics of the Nation*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 2001, p. 3.

² John Higham. *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925*. New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1998, p. 4

³ *Ibidem*.

expressions. Alan Kraut, regards nativism as the belief that immigrants “pose an imminent danger to [Americas’] way of life.”⁴ In Kraut’s definition there is a cultural connotation, a perception that foreigners modify habits and lifestyles, altering the basic values of American society. Finally, to others nativism is simply “hostility to foreigners”, which includes an aversion to foreign persons living temporarily in the United States as well as immigrants.⁵

These definitions highlight several important aspects of nativism. First, the term denotes a clear idealization and preference for certain allegedly distinctive roots of the American nation (WASP, white, Anglo-Saxon, protestant). According to nativists any foreign influences could contaminate the American essence diminishing the splendor and authenticity of the country. Second, nativists are fundamentally against minorities. The nativist’s opposition to foreigners has varied according to the historical context. Third, the intensity of nativism ranges according to the person or organization. The Klux Klan of the late 1910s and 1920s was in favor of the supremacy of the white race and against, immigrants, Jewish and Catholics,⁶ while today’s Minuteman adopts a more moderate position watching the border, and alerting the Border Patrol of the crossing of undocumented workers. Fourth, nativist expressions commonly exalt American nationalism. Fifth, nativist expressions have an economic, political, social, racial and cultural component. Finally, nativists people or organizations justify their position in different ways. The *Ku Klux Klan* uses racial ideology. The English Only movement positions itself as defending American culture. The *American Border Patrol* demands respect of US laws.

However, as Linda S. Bosniak has asserted, although these definitions may help us to understand the nature of nativism they “tell us nothing about which sort of policies and positions regarding immigration qualify as ‘hostile’.”⁷ According to Joe R. Feagin, nativism stresses with different emphasis four main themes:

- 1) “That certain ‘races’ are intellectually and culturally inferior and should not be allowed into the country, at least not in substantial numbers.”
- 2) Nativists view “those who have immigrated from racially and culturally inferior groups” as a problematic in terms of their complete assimilation to the dominant Anglo culture.

⁴ Alan Kraut. *Huddled Masses: The Immigrant in American Society, 1880-1921*. Arlington Heights, Illinois, Harlan Davidson, 1982, p. 150.

⁵ Leonrad Dinnerstein, Roger L. Nichols and David M. Reimers. *Native and Strangers: A Multicultural History of America*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 60.

⁶ On the Ku Klux Klan one may consult John Moffat Mecklin. *The Ku Klux Klan: A Study of the American Mind*. New York, Harcovot, Broce and Co., 1924. Charles C. Alexander. *The Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest*. Kentucky, University of Kentucky Press, 1965. Hiram Wesley Evans. “The Klan Fights for Americanism”, *North American Review*. Vol. CCXXIII, March 1926. Evans was the Imperial Wizard of the Klan.

⁷ Linda S. Bosnik. “‘Nativism’ The Concept: Some Reflections”, in Juan F. Perea. *Immigrats Out. The New Nativism and the Anti-Immigrant Impulse in the United States*. New York, New York University Press, 1997, p. 282.

- 3) A third theme articulated most often in troubled economic times, is that 'inferior' immigrants are taking the jobs and disrupting the economic conditions of native-born Americans."
- 4) "Immigrants are creating serious government crisis, such as corrupting the voting system or overloading school and welfare systems."⁸

This paper is based on Feagin's views but expands his conception. In my opinion contemporary nativism also include the following premises:

- 5) Immigrants bring to the US illness that not only affect the health of American citizens, but also strain the social security budget. Although this theme could be included in point four, I have decided to separate it. Immigrants have been accused of abusing the health care system, abuse exemplified by mothers giving birth to their children in the United States in order to secure legal American residence or immigrants seeking treatment of expensive illness at the expense of American taxpayers. Nativists have added the possibility that foreigners will reintroduce epidemics previously eradicated in the United States.⁹
- 6) Immigrants strain environmental resources. People that cross the border increase the United States' population, using up scarce natural resources like water and contributing to the deterioration of the environment.
- 7) Immigrants impact American national security. They are frequently associated with terrorism, or at least with facilitating terrorists' entry into the United States. This linkage between immigration and national security emerged, prior to September 11, in the 1990s when several measures to secure the border were proposed and implemented.

In this essay I use the term nativism in its broadest conception as the rejection by some Americans of foreigners, their institutions, their ideas and their culture. Over the years the nature of nativism has changed, remaining faithful to some basic principles, while incorporating new themes and issues according to contemporary historical circumstances.

Current and past nativist expressions differ in at least four ways. First, the dominant nativist expressions of the late 19th and early 20th century were racist and anti-Semitic or anti-Catholic. The Ku Klux Klan typifies this type of nativism. However, as David R. Reimers has rightly pointed out "the explicit racist and religious prejudice tones of those debates [at the turn-of-the-

⁸ Joe R. Feagin. "Old Poison in New Bottles: The Deep Roots of Modern Nativism", in *Ibidem*, pp. 13-14.

⁹ This perspective is not new. Some anti-immigration expressions of the beginning of the 20th century were against foreigners because they were carriers of fatal diseases. Today the conditions have worsened because the undocumented workers —more complicated to detect than the legal immigrants of the late 19th century and early 20th— are the main transporters of these contagious sickness.

century nativism] are absent today and I do not label critics as racist.”¹⁰ Second, the rise of nativist expressions has frequently been associated with economic crisis. In contrast, today’s nativism has emerged at a moment of prosperity when the unemployment rate is only 4.5%. Third, immigrants currently arrive from new immigrant sending regions. In the late 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, immigrants came primarily from Europe. Today most immigrants come from Asia and Latin America, in particular from Mexico. Nativists believe that these people are culturally inferior, difficult to assimilate and they often form ethnic enclaves that isolate them from the greater society. Fourth, security issues have become a central component of most nativist expressions. Immigration is perceived as a national security threat.

The seven topics mentioned above, constitute a sort of typology of nativism that have been modified according to contemporary circumstances and concerns. There are individuals and movements that emphasis only one of these themes, while others endorse several. Broader anti-immigration perspectives tend to incorporate more of these themes and display an intense conspiratorial perspective. For these types of people or organizations immigrants are the causes of a multitude of social, economic and political problems facing the United States.

These nativist tendencies evidence, in the words of historian Richard Hofstadter, a “Paranoid Style”,¹¹ in their way of interpreting facts and events and in the way that they narrativize events. Nativism is “precipitated by the sense of threat”, by the idea that “foreigners can challenge a group’s position by threatening their racial dominance, cultural symbols (*e.g.* language and costumes), encroaching on their privilege resources (*e.g.* jobs and public benefits), or threatening their sense of individual or national security. In many respects, these threats imperil privilege (*e.g.* racial, economic, environmental and so on).”¹² Thus, a conspiratorial perspective is a central component of nativist.

¹⁰ David M. Reimers. *Unwelcome Strangers. American Identity and the Turn Against Immigration*. New York, Columbia University Press, 1998, p. 1.

¹¹ Richard Hofstadter. *The Paranoid Style In American Politics and Other Essays*. New York, Knof, 1965.

¹² Brian N. Fry. *Nativism and Immigration: Regulating the American Dream*. New York, LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC, 2007, p. 31.

2. Main Features of Conspiracy Theory

American history is rife with conspiratorial expressions. Conspiracy theory has played an important role not only in politics, but also in American popular culture. As Justin Peters has asserted “conspiracy theory is as American as apple pie.”¹³

Conspiracy theory has been defined in a variety of ways, leading some to conclude that the concept is so volatile that has lost its meaning. For the purposes of this analysis I will rely on the definition put forward by Benjamin McArthur. For McArthur, conspiracy theory “implies a belief held by a sizable number of people that there are influential and malevolent group seeking more power for them and/or harm to others.”¹⁴ Generally, conspiracy theory includes several components. First, usually a conspiracy includes a hero who discovers the plot or plan for global manipulation developed by a powerful group. This hero is “capable of perceiving the conspiracy before it is fully obvious to an as yet unaroused public.”¹⁵ Second, the hero enjoys a certain notoriety based on his or her status as a researcher or educator, who has access to more information than the general public. He has read information, been briefed, or followed the news attentively. He or she alerts the public about nature of the plot, its meaning, and its consequences. Third, the hero is typically a powerful person, capable of manipulating the people that believe in him.

Fourth, “conspiracy theory is a theory of power”, that perceives the “power of the ruling individual, or coalition to be thoroughly instrumental, controlling virtually all aspects of social life, politics and economics.”¹⁶ Fifth, conspiracy expressions tend to inflate the power of the person or organization accused of conspiracy. “The enemy is held to posses”, writes Richard Hofstadter, “some special source of power: he controls the press; he directs the public mind through ‘managed news; he has unlimited funds; he has a new secret for influencing the mind (brainwashing); he has special techniques for seduction (the catholic confessional); he is gaining a stranglehold on the educational system.”¹⁷ The enemy, therefore, provokes fear or at least some concern in the public. Sixth, most conspiracy cases incorporate an element of manipulation. The powerful few —bankers, communists, Masonic organizations, foreign countries, the CIA, the FBI, etc.— control or influence

¹³ Cited by Justin Peters. “Paranoid Style: Sen. Wellstone’s Death was an Accident? Yeah, Right”, *The Washington Monthly*, vol. 36, no. 12, December 2004, p. 13.

¹⁴ Benjamin McArthur. “‘They’re out to Get US’: Another Look at Our Paranoid Tradition”, *The History Teacher*, vol. 29, no.1, November 1995, p.38.

¹⁵ John Bouknight. “‘Conspiracy Theory’ and Sound Argumentation: The Method of Cocaine Politics for Resolving ‘Conflicting World Views’”, *Conference Papers. ETC.*, vol. 61, no.1, April 2004, p. 58.

¹⁶ Mark Fenster. *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*. Mineapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999, p. xiv.

¹⁷ Richard Hofstadter. *Op.Cit.* p. 32.

the destiny of many.¹⁸ Some examples include the belief that Jewish bankers have conspired against the world's population, the CIA's surveillance of U.S. citizens' private lives, and the alleged communist infiltration of the American government and public life.

Seventh, a typical characteristic of most conspiracy persons or movements is "simplism"; that is the unambiguous adscription of single cause and remedies for multi-factored phenomena."¹⁹ Thus, some people believe that an international cabal of Jewish bankers as provoked an economic crisis in the United States, while others consider that communists killed President John F. Kennedy. These simplistic explanations serve several functions. First, they offer a way to make sense of complicated phenomenon. "Conspiracy theory", argues Mark Fenster, "is an attempt to apprehend the past and the present by placing disparate events within a unifying interpretative framework."²⁰ Second, they provide an explanation that can be easily understood by the general public. Third, they can be used to persuade the population of the plot generated by an alleged enemy. Finally, they encourage nationalist sentiments.

Eighth, conspiracy theory is commonly associated with populist tendencies. Here, populism denotes a clash between the "powerful and the powerless... a style of political rhetoric... whose speakers conceived of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class, view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic, and seek to mobilize the former against the latter."²¹ Populist organizations or leaders usually express anger against certain sectors of the population.²² They believe that current conditions are unjust and ought to be changed. They use their rhetoric to persuade a significant number of people of the damage being inflicted on them by powerful elite. These leaders seek to convince the population to endorse their perspective, and thus, fight or at least denounce the social, political and economic inequalities provoked by the selfish ambition of a powerful few. Populism appeals to common sense and the capacity of average people to detect problems and contribute to the transformation of their political and economic conditions. Populists believe that the elite have "ignored, corrupted, and/or betrayed the core ideal of American democracy",²³ and seek significant changes in the structure of power of American society.

¹⁸ Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Rabb. *The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America, 1790-1977*. Second Edition, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1978, p. 15.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*. p. 7.

²⁰ Mark Fenster. *Op. Cit.* p. xvii.

²¹ Michael Kazin. *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*. New York, Basic Books, 1995, p. 1.

²² See Hans-George Betz and Carol Johnson. "Against the Current—Stemming the Tide: The Nostalgic Ideology of the Contemporary Radical Populist Right", *Journal of Political Ideology*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2004, p. 313.

²³ Michael Kazin. *Op. Cit.* p. 2.

In the next section, I will address the anti-immigration views of Lou Dobbs. As I will show, his ideological perspective includes most of the seven premises mentioned above and conspiracy theory and populism are central components of his thought.

3. Dobbs' Nativism

Lou Dobbs has declared several times, "the truth is that I have never made a racist statement in my life. Period. I have never made a jingoistic statement, a nativist statement."²⁴ Dobbs' writing, statements and political views belie such declarations. As I will show, Dobbs' can properly be classified as a contemporary nativist. The broadcasting of Lou Dobbs Tonight started in April 2001, only few months before the tragic events of September 11. Since then Dobbs has been able to channel American concerns about security and terrorism, presenting an alarmist perspective on current national issues

Dobbs started an intensive populist campaign in favor of the middle class. According to him, corporations investments overseas and use of undocumented labor have provoked unemployment and low salaries. Dobbs believes that government, large corporations, and special interest groups have declared a "war on middle class".²⁵ Dobbs presents this argument in populist rhetoric that pits the needs of ordinary people against the inflated ambitions of corporate America.

His populism embraces both patriotism and political fundamentalism. He believes in the infallibility and immutability of the nation's founding documents: The Bill of Rights, the Declaration of Independence, and the American Constitution. Dobbs included these texts at the end of the *War on the Middle Class*. When Erik Kuhn asked him why he included those documents, Dobbs replied "In those two documents [the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution] are our national values... I am urging people to turn to our national values... It is your responsibility, and mine and everyone else to ensure that we return to that fundamental values."²⁶ With these words Dobbs follows an American tradition that identifies the meaning of US citizenship and Americanism with the nation's founding documents. In this regard, often radical right organizations profess political fundamentalism. For these expressions, the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and the Bill of Rights, are conceived as a sacred documents, as a living texts that contain infallible true that should be recognized and preserve. These documents are not subject to external criticism. They have unquestionable

²⁴ Bib Garfield. "Interviews with Lou Dobbs", in (www.onthemedialia.org/transcripts/2006/11/17/04).

²⁵ Lou Dobbs. *War on the Middle Class: How The Government, Big Business, and Special Interest Groups are Waging War on the American Dream and How to Fight Back*. New York, Viking, 2006.

²⁶ Eric Kuhn. "Conversation with CNN's Lou Dobbs: The Economy, Immigration, The Constitution, and a Little, Tiny Sip of Vodka", in *The Huffington Post*, Posted November 3, 2006.

perennial value. In other words, for Dobbs and several radical right expressions these historical documents contain the essence of American values and national pride.

Dobbs connects this political fundamentalism to populism, which confers certain legitimacy on his ideas. He is fighting not only for the well being of some sectors of the population—the middle-class— but also for the well being of the nation. His struggle, in other words, is for the preservation of authentic American values. He asserts:

“Without question, I am an independent populist, and as I’ve said before, the antonym of populism is elitism, which I reject as simply un-American... I’m an ardent and fervent believer in the first three words of the radical populist document, which begins with the words ‘We the People’ ”²⁷

For Dobbs, the common man, ordinary people constitute the real America. Dobbs’ we is a restrictive we that excludes those who do not comprehend the middle class.

Dobbs has reserved a special place in his program for the topic of illegal immigration, presenting his extreme anti-immigration perspective to his viewers.

In the section of the show called *Broken Borders* he presents his extreme anti-immigration position to his viewers. This charismatic anchor does not use the crude comments of organizations such as the American Border Patrol or the Minutemen but rather the sophisticated language of a Harvard graduate. His xenophobia is expressed in elegant if inflammatory language. His conspiracy is not that of a cowboy, with rifle, jeans, and night vision binoculars, but that of the serene man wearing a suit and tie.

Dobbs’ arguments against immigration are filled with conspiracy theory.²⁸ He claims that the United States is experiencing an “invasion of illegal aliens,”²⁹ who are bringing economic, social, cultural, environmental, and health problems with them. His language is not only categorical, but also full of symbolism. The undocumented are dangerous, perverse, and the sources of problems that make American society ill from its very core. From Dobbs point of view, Mexican and American politicians have joined American corporations in a conspiracy to destroy the United States.

²⁷ Lou Dobbs. “Dobbs: Populist Tide has Elitist Running Scared” and “Dobbs: I’m a Populist, Deal with it”, both in (www.cnn.usnews.com).

²⁸ On Conspiracy theory as a central component of radical right expressions one may consult Seymour Martin Lipset y Earl Raab. *The Politics of Unreason: Right Wing Extremism in America, 1790-1977*. Second Edition, University of Chicago Press, 1978.

²⁹ Lou Dobbs. *War On... Op. Cit.* p. 132. See also Lou Dobbs. “U.S. is Best Democracy Money can Buy”, in (www.cnn.usnews.com). A similar assertion is cited by Peter Beinart in “Going Native”.

Dobbs is convinced that the Mexican government promotes immigration to the United States. According to him, Vicente Fox headed a "corrupt and ineffective government... who has no apparent incentive to control the flow of drugs being shipped from Mexico into the United States and every incentive to continue the exportation of illegal aliens into this country."³⁰ The Mexican government promotes immigration because it receives 20 billion dollars in remittances, money that is difficult to reject. Dobbs correctly asserts "the United States has in effect become Mexico's political and safety valve."³¹ However, in his view the Mexican government is "exporting poverty and importing substantial portion of his economy thanks to the millions of Mexicans living in the United States who send billions of dollars back to Mexico every year."³²

According to Dobbs, several sectors of American society participate with the Mexican government in this conspiracy against the middle class. Among them he includes: the American government, corporations, the labor movement, Hispanic organizations, humanitarian groups, religious denominations and political parties. These various groups share the goal of enriching corporate America. "Corporate America", affirms Dobbs, "...with both the Democratic and Republican Parties as its tool... wants you and me to forget that we are first citizens, and that America is first a nation."³³ Dobbs believes that corporate America use political parties, public institutions and civil organizations to achieve their ambitions.

Typically, after identifying the "enemy of the nation", and describing the ways in which they conspire against the middle class, Dobbs gives a legal spin to his argument, with the goal of giving his arguments legitimacy and categorical indisputability. The problem with the undocumented workers, he argues, is that they break the law, and that is prohibited in any country where the rule of law holds sway. "We are a nation of immigrants", he asserted in 2005, "but we are first a nation of laws, and upholding those laws and our national values makes this great country of ours possible."³⁴ Undocumented works, therefore, should be punished for violating the law instead of being rewarded with an amnesty or massive legalizations.

Dobbs strikes at undocumented workers and the businesses that hire them with the same intensity. He believes that the anti-patriotic employers of illegal workers should also be punished. In this regard, Dobbs considers, Bush's immigration policy, in particular his proposal for a temporary workers program a "national job fair for those businesses and farms that don't want to pay a living wage..."³⁵ This legalist perspective allows him to assert that he

³⁰ Lou Dobbs. "U.S. Policy on Immigration is a Tragic Jock", in *The Arizona Republic*. August 28, 2005.

³¹ Lou Dobbs. *War On... Op. Cit.* p. 133.

³² Lou Dobbs. *Ibidem.* p.149.

³³ Lou Dobbs. "Dobbs: U.S. is best Democracy Money Can Buy", in (www.cnn.usnews).

³⁴ Lou Dobbs. "U.S. Policy on..." *Op. Cit.*

³⁵ Lou Dobbs. *The Politics of Immigration. U.S. News & World Report.* Vol. 136, Issue 1, 1/12/2004, p. 40.

welcomes legal immigration which he considers a “vitaly important to our country and its future.”³⁶

Faithful to traditional nativist positions, Dobbs believes that undocumented workers injure American economy. The arguments are familiar. Undocumented workers use public services such as the healthcare and educational systems, drive down wages and do not pay taxes. “There is no question”, Dobbs writes, “that... mass immigration would have a calamitous effect on working citizens and their families.”³⁷ Likewise, he claims that “states spend more than \$7 billion each year on K-12 education for illegal aliens and hundreds of millions more in treating illegal aliens in border-state hospitals.”³⁸ Dobbs recognizes that Mexican workers are exploited. “American business”, he asserts, “is exploiting cheap labor and paradoxically doing so with the blessing and support of national unions.”³⁹ Thus, capital and labor, unionism and big business come together to exploit the Mexican worker, and in the course of doing so degrade middle class standards of living.

Despite brief flashes of compassion for undocumented workers, Dobbs insists that they harm not only American workers and their families but also the environment. “Our population growth”, sustains Dobbs, “driven in part by unchecked immigration, is already straining our healthcare and educational system, less noticeable –but far more important– putting a heavy burden on our land, food production, water supply and the quality of the air we breath.”⁴⁰ In an alarmist fashion, Dobbs asserts that in few decades the United States will not have enough food and water to feed its population.

In addition to the economic and environmental problems created by the arrival of undocumented workers, Dobbs connects undocumented immigration to national security. The correlation between immigration and international security concerns is expressed in several ways. First, he links immigrants to criminals, who are filling the jails and provoking a significant drain on tax money. “One-third of the inmates now serving time in federal prisons come from some other country, one-third”, Dobbs has remarked. “The cost to taxpayers, \$1.5 billion.”⁴¹

Second, Dobbs connects immigration and the illegal drug trade. “There is a common front in our illegal-alien crisis”, he asserts, “the war on drugs and the global war on terror. That front line is easily defined as our nation’s borders, airports and seaports.”⁴² Dobbs consider the “failure of secure our borders” the reason that the United States “will continue to lose the war on

³⁶ Lou Dobbs. *War on...Op. Cit.*, p. 134.

³⁷ Lou Dobbs. “Dobbs: Big Media hide truth about Immigration”, in (www.cnn.usnews).

³⁸ Lou Dobbs. “The Politics of Immigration”, *Op.Cit.*, p. 40.

³⁹ Lou Dobbs. “No More Borders Games”, in *U.S. News & World Report*, vol. 138, Issue 4, January 31, 2005, p. 42.

⁴⁰ Lou Dobbs. “Population Overload”, in *U.S. News & World Report*, vol. 135, Issue 14, October 27, 2003, p. 54.

⁴¹ Lou Dobbs. “Transcripts Lou Dobbs Tonight”, November 4, 2003. See also Transcripts March 12, 2005, in (www.cnn.com/transcripts).

⁴² Lou Dobbs. *U.S. Policy...Op. Cit.*

drugs and lose a generation of Americans to those drugs.”⁴³ Of course, he emphasizes only one part of the problem, supply, ignoring the other half of the drug-trafficking chain, consumption. These sorts of contentions reflect a central feature of Dobbs rhetoric: its simplicity. As Lipset and Rabb assert, radical right expressions often offer singular explanations for complicated phenomena. In line with Lipset and Rabb’s claim, Dobbs seeks to persuade important sectors of the population of his argument not educate them. For him, to go deeper in his analysis is pointless.

This strategy effectively demonizes immigrants, ascribing new evils to undocumented workers, and associating “illegal aliens” with a variety of problems currently faced by the United States. Dobbs attempts to further degrade immigrants by associating them with leftist politics. He claims that left-wing groups control the pro-immigration movement. “How significant is the impact of leftist within the legal immigration movement?” Dobbs asks rhetorically. “It is not an accident”, he continues, “that they chose May 1, as their day of demonstration and boycott. It is the worldwide day of commemorative demonstrations by various socialist, communist, and even anarchic organizations.”⁴⁴ The association of any political or social movement with leftist organizations has traditionally been used by conservative and radical right organizations, which portray communism as evil, to denigrate their opponents. Viewed this way, immigrants are associated with a political ideology that is fundamentally opposed to basic American values.

Finally, the connection between terrorism and illegal immigration has become one of Dobbs’ favorite themes. In his view, immigration is a national security issue. According to Dobbs, “an estimated 3 million illegal aliens will cross our border this year. No leap of imagination is required to fear that a handful of terrorist could be among such large group of people.”⁴⁵ Dobbs’s argument is logical but implausible. The terrorists, who attacked New York and Washington D.C., came to the United States legally. Did they need to save money for months or years, hire a coyote (pollero) to guide them across the border, or risk dying in the Arizona dessert? Terrorists are well funded. They can apply for a visa, buy an airplane ticket to come to the US, stay in fancy hotels, and pay for airplane lessons. In other words, they have easier ways to get into the United States.

Dobbs not only intertwines immigration and national security, but also links the arrival of undocumented immigrants with the deterioration of American’s health. “The United States”, he claims, “is vulnerable to disease crossing the borders.”⁴⁶ Of course, any border in the world is vulnerable to the crossing of infected people, animals, or merchandise, as the introduction

⁴³ Lou Dobbs. *U.S. Policy...Op. Cit.*

⁴⁴ Lou Dobbs. “Dobbs: Radical Groups Taking Control of Immigrant Movement”, *Op. Cit.*

⁴⁵ Lou Dobbs. “Our Borderline Security”, *Op. Cit.*

⁴⁶ Lou Dobbs. “Importing Health Hazards”, *U.S. News & World Report*, vol. 135, no. 20, August 12, 2003.

of SARS into Canada through commercial flights demonstrated. However, Dobbs overstates the risks. He claims that the smuggling of animals, vegetables, and, most importantly, people, “continue(s) to be a disaster for disease control in this country.” According to his data, which is not drawn from academic studies, “there are more than 7,000 people in this country suffering from leprosy, once considered a rare disease here. Many of those infected immigrated from areas with leprosy problems, like Mexico and Brazil.”⁴⁷

Here Dobbs again follows an established tradition among nativist groups of constructing an image of immigrants as carriers of disease. Howard Markel and Alexandra Minna Stern have shown how in three different historical periods—from the late 19th century to 1924; from 1924 to 1965; and from 1965 to the present—foreigners have been “constantly associated with germs and contagion.”⁴⁸ In the early 20th century immigrants were “regarded as physically, mentally, and morally inferior to the older immigrant class.”⁴⁹ Of course these assertions contain powerful symbolic language. As Gerald V. O’Brien has argued the “social community is viewed as analogous to the physical body.”⁵⁰ Equating immigrants with sick animals and conceiving of them as vectors of disease turns them into agents of destruction who attack a central component of American society, human health. In his view, undocumented immigrants are like a cancer, which invades other parts of the social body—the United States—until it finally destroys that body. For Dobbs if American authorities do not do something soon, death is imminent. If American authorities stop the cancer—the undocumented workers—the United States might recover its physical and social health.

Dobbs connection of immigrants with deadly disease and in particular his claims about leprosy has been discredited as unverifiable by Lesley Stahl of *60 Minutes* and the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC). CNN has not done anything to correct the presentation of false information in a news program.⁵¹ Dobbs continues to be a popular host and his program consistently earns high ratings. A significant accomplishment, especially if we consider that “CNN is now behind in rating against Fox News and also face competition from MSNBC at home and many networks abroad including BBC world Rupert Murdoch’s Sky News, and others.”⁵² Under these circumstances, CNN has little incentive to ask Dobbs to change his inaccurate and sensationalist style. On the contrary,

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁸ Howard Markel and Alexandra Minna Stern. “The Foreignness of Germs: The persistent Association of Immigrants and Disease in American Society”, *The Milbank Quarterly*, vol. 80, no. 4, 2002, p. 757.

⁴⁹ Gerald V. O’Brien. “Indigestible Food, Conquering Hordes, and Waste Materials: Metaphors of Immigrants and Early Immigration Restriction Debate in the United States”, in *Metaphor and Symbols*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2003, p. 34.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*. p. 36.

⁵¹ “Lou Dobbs, Advocacy” *Journalist?* CBS, (www.cbs.com). See letter from J. Richard Cohen to Jonathan Klein, President of CNN, May 9, 2007, in (www.splcenter.org).

⁵² Stuart H. Loory. “CNN Today: A Young Giant Stumbles”, *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 22, no. 4, October, 2005, p. 342.

there are good reasons, including competing with Fox News' Bill O'Reilly, to encourage his alarmist approach. Dobbs sells sensational news in the best tradition of yellow journalism. CNN in turn, profits from his success.

Finally, Dobbs nativism has a cultural component, expressed in his defense of English as the official language of the United States. Dobbs believes that language is the common bond that unites Americans. To fully assimilate, immigrants must speak English. He often opens his discussions of English Only legislation by quoting President Theodore Roosevelt:

"In the first place, we should insist that if the immigrant who comes here in good faith becomes an American and assimilates himself to us, he shall be treated on an exact equality with everyone else, for it is an outrage to discriminate against any such man because of creed, or birthplace, or origin. But this is predicated upon the man's becoming in very fact and American, and nothing but an American...

There can be no divided allegiance here. Any man who says he is an American, but something else also, isn't an American at all. We have room for but one flag, the American flag. And this excludes the red flag, which symbolizes all wars against liberty and civilization, just as much as it excludes any foreign flag of a nation to which we are hostile... We have room for but one language here, and that is the English language... and we have room for but one sole loyalty and that is a loyalty to the American people."⁵³

With this extensive quote, Dobbs resuscitates Roosevelt's anti-immigration beliefs. In 1907 Roosevelt asked Congress to analyze the immigration problem. The Dillingham Commission, composed by six members of Congress and three presidential appointees, made a distinction between the old immigrants that came from the United Kingdom, Germany and Scandinavia and the new immigrants that were arriving from southern and Eastern Europe. The Commission concluded that the new groups of immigrants consisted of "unskilled laboring men who have come, in large part temporarily, from... less progressive and advanced countries." They "avoided agricultural pursuits and congregate together in sections apart from Native Americans. It was a class... far less intelligent than the old and actuated... by different ideals, thereby creating a widespread feeling of apprehension about its effects on the economic and social welfare of the country."⁵⁴ Roosevelt was sympathetic to the Commission's conclusions. He believed, like Dobbs, that the United States was being seriously affected by the arrival of the new immigrants. Roosevelt advocated mandatory learning of English. He even suggested that those who

⁵³ Lou Dobbs. *War on the Middle Class. Op. Cit.* p. 209.

⁵⁴ Bernard A. Weisberger. "Genes, Brains, and Bunk", *American Heritage*, vol. 146, Issue 2, April 1995, p. 28

did not learn English should go back to their countries. Roosevelt spoke out strongly against hyphenated Americanism, demanded immediate assimilation, and declaring that immigrants should break any attachments to their cultures and countries of origin. Roosevelt pronounced: "the salvation of our people lies in having a nationalized and unified American ready for the tremendous task of both war and peace."⁵⁵

Dobbs demonstrates not only his affinity with Roosevelt's anti-immigration politics but also his support of what was known as 100% Americanism, which posits White Anglo Saxon Protestant culture as the true expression of American national identity. Dobbs favors, one language, one flag and the celebration of "truly" American holidays. "One of the things that screams at me", said Dobbs during a broadcast, is that "every St. Patrick's Day, every Columbus Day, I see people celebrating a distant history and their lineage, presumably, that has nothing to do with celebrating America, and I find that astonishing. Frankly I resent those kinds of holidays."⁵⁶ Dobbs' view of what is truly American is extremely narrow. Is St. Patrick's Day an American Holiday or an Irish holiday, or both? Is Cinco de Mayo an American holiday or a Mexican holiday? Mexico certainly does not celebrate Cinco de Mayo as the Americans do. Both holidays seem to be American creations. It is part of U.S. history to absorb, appropriate, and even modify cultural elements from other countries. Do Italians eat deep pan pizzas? Do Japanese eat tepanyakki? Do Mexicans eat chili con carne? Of course not. They are modifications of certain eating habits of other countries (pizza), or the invention of dishes that are perceived to be similar to the cuisine of other countries (tepanyakki or chili con carne).

Dobbs props up his own nativist views, by inviting anti-immigration advocates to appear on his show. A study on the mass media conducted at the beginning of 2006 showed that in the first two months of that year the guest list for Dobbs' program was overwhelmingly composed of people affiliated with the Republican Party or other conservative movements.⁵⁷ Dobbs not only disseminates his own nativist beliefs, but provides a platform for the diffusion of anti-immigration views on television.

⁵⁵ On Roosevelt's anti-immigration stance see: (www.snopes.com/politics/quotes/troosevelt.asp).

⁵⁶ Lou Dobbs. "Lou Dobbs Tonight, Transcripts", November 10, 2005, in (www.cnn.com).

⁵⁷ Media Matters for America. "The Lineup on Lou Dobbs Tonight Overwhelmingly Tilts Right", March 27, 2006, en (www.mediamatters.org).

Conclusions

Lou Dobbs clearly represents an example of contemporary American nativism. His opposition to undocumented immigrants is presented in several forms, and covers the seven themes usually associated with nativist expressions previously cited in this article. Dobbs argues that undocumented workers do not fully assimilate affecting American national identity. They take the American jobs and what is more, strain the United States' health, educational and prison systems. They carry disease and generate environmental problems. Above all, they threaten American national security. He presents these views as a conspiracy theory in which the Mexican government, its American counterpart, corporations, political parties and the labor movement have joined forces to destroy the essence of America. His fight against the evil represented by illegal immigration is, from his perspective, a patriotic crusade and a way to return the country to the fundamental aspects of its society and culture.

Dobbs longs for a United States frozen in the late 18th or early 19th century. However, since that time the country has changed, as has the notion of American identity. Identities are not static; they change and change again over the years. Today the United States is even more complex and diverse than ever. Cultural historian Lawrence Levine as argued that the United States has always been a fluid and multicultural society, in which an Anglo-Saxon Abraham Lincoln and Jewish Moses can live in peace and harmony.⁵⁸ To assert, as Dobbs does, that there is only one truly American culture, is to deny the contribution of African Americans, Irish Americans, Italians, Chinese, Mexican immigrants and many others to the development and culture of this country. Lawrence Levine captures the idea of the United States as a nation in permanent renaissance, writing "The notion of the United States as a society which is constantly *emerging*, with an identity and culture which are never permanently fixed, does seems to mirror reality more closely than previous explanations."⁵⁹ The United States is a dynamic country. It is a multicultural society and immigration has been a central component of its history. As Caroline Ware wrote in the 1940s, "immigrants and the children of immigrants are the American people. Their culture is American culture not merely a contribution to American culture."⁶⁰ The United States continues, as in years past, to debate the nature of American identity and the changes brought to that identity by the different waves of immigration. Every period of structural change experienced by the country brings modifications. There are always

⁵⁸ Lawrence W. Levine. *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture, and History*. Boston, Bacon University Press, 1996.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*. p. 141.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*. p. 143.

transition periods in which those changes have not yet stabilized. In those moments of transformation, sectors of the population seek to maintain the *statu quo* or revive a glorious past.

Dobbs positions himself as a popular hero defending the United States against globalization and the changes that accompany it. His views reflect his fear of the current interdependent world, in which transnational phenomena challenge traditional ways of conceptualizing identity. In a culture of instant, worldwide information, and the blurring or breaking of national boundaries, patriotism has become a central weapon of those who oppose change. Recuperating a glorious past is one way to maintain stability and security.

This type of rhetoric coincides perfectly with positions held by members of the Republican Party. Although Dobbs has repeatedly said that his job is “to report an independent, nonpartisan reality”,⁶¹ his views on immigration echo those of the most conservative sectors of the GOP. The immigration issue has divided Republicans into two basic camps, those that support the immigration reform proposed by President George W. Bush and those who oppose Bush’s proposal and favor the strict restriction of immigration. Important sectors of the party are in favor of the militarization of the border, and adamantly against the regularization of undocumented workers currently living in the United States or a guest workers program. Dobbs’ views reinforce and disseminate this position, and his program has become a platform for anti-immigration activists.

Dobbs perspective also stimulates antagonism between Latinos and other sectors of the population. If undocumented workers are the reason of America’s general crisis, it is natural that Dobbs’ audience could adopt a hostile position against these people and the Latinos population in general. Following the popular anchor of CNN, Dobbs’ spectators frequently expressed angry views against immigration and undocumented workers. Two examples: Peggy from Canton Michigan, “shouldn’t the United States be taking action, perhaps sanctions against Mexico for its part in sending its citizens into this country illegally.” Second, Mark from Arlington Texas, “Lou, I finally have figured out how to replace my job that was outsourced to India. All I have to do is move to Mexico, learn the language, then cross the border back into the U.S. as an illegal immigrant.”⁶² This general situation has provoked the reaction of Janet Murguia, leader of the National Council of La Raza, who has accused Dobbs of “providing a platform for vilifying immigrants”, and “using hate speech, hate group to make a case of immigration.”⁶³

⁶¹ Jonathan Darman. “Lou Dobbs on Immigration and Objectivity”, April 2, 2006 in *Newsweek*, *MSNBC.com*, in (www.msnbc.msn.com/id/12116193/site/newsweek/print/1/displaymode/1098/).

⁶² See Lou Dobbs Transcripts, May 5, 2005, and April 27, 2005, in (www.cnn.com/transcripts).

⁶³ See Janet Murguia. “President and CEO Janet Murguia’s Remarks at the Wave of Hope Press Briefing”, January 31, 2008, in (www.nclr.org) and Lou Dobbs Transcripts, February 4, 2008, in (www.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0802/04/ldt.01.html).

Traditionally, anti-immigration positions have emerged in the United States during economic downturns and periods of high unemployment and high levels of immigration. Why at a moment of low unemployment do we have powerful anti-immigration expressions? Why has a figure such as Dobbs emerged today? Three factors help explain this phenomenon: First, the characteristics of the current wave of immigration; second, the international climate; and third, overwhelming concerns about national security.

Here the traditional distinction between old and new immigrants is less important than the fact that current immigration, in particular Mexican immigration differs markedly from previous waves. In the past, the arrival of foreigners was concentrated in relatively short periods of time. Italian immigrants basically arrived between 1880 and 1920. In contrast, the Mexican immigration that began in the early 20th century has never stopped. For a century Americans have seen a first generation of Mexicans living in the United States. Today, first, second, third and even older generations live in the same regions. The third and older generations are fully integrated, the newer generations are not.

The current international climate, strongly marked by the effects of globalization, also nurtures anti-immigration tendencies. Today's world is characterized by mobility. Ideas, capitals, goods and information cross national boundaries with surprising speed. Capitals, assembly plants and jobs move from the Mexican border to China in relatively short spans of time. Massive immigration worldwide is also part of globalization. The United States has supported this tendency by participating in international agreements like NAFTA. This globalized world clashes with isolationist factions, which support the building of walls or restricting the arrival of foreign of labor. Two antagonistic forces –the international and the domestic– co-exist within the United States. The conflict is not going to disappear soon. On the contrary, massive immigration will only continue in the future.⁶⁴

Finally, one important question remains to be answered. Why, contrary historical tendencies, during the current conditions of low unemployment we have observed the emergences or anti-immigration expressions such as Lou Dobbs' nativism? As mentioned previously, radical right movements tend to emerge in moments of economic crisis. Authors like Daniel Guerin, have linked the rise of fascism, for example, to the 1929 international economic crisis.⁶⁵ However, there are moments in which forces coming from the political-ideological terrain rather than economics explain the emergence of radical right expressions or anti-immigration tendencies. This was clearly the case with the rise of McCarthyism in the 1950s. Today, the United States is experiencing conditions similar to those of the 1950s. As at mid-century, the

⁶⁴ Anne McNevin. "Irregular Migrants, Neoliberal Geographies and Spatial Frontiers of the 'Political'", *Review of International Studies*, vol. 33, pp. 670-671.

⁶⁵ Daniel Guerin. *Fascisme et Grand Capital*. Paris, Francois Maspero, 1965.

United States is a significant force internationally, is prospering economically, and is threatened by international forces with different ideological and political views. Today in a climate of post 9/11 fears, large sectors of the population feel vulnerable and threatened by the outside world. Radical right organizations and extremist advocates like Lou Dobbs have mapped this fear onto the terrain of immigration.

Given this state of affairs, Dobbs' opposition to undocumented immigration acquires special meaning. Undocumented immigrants are unidentifiable and therefore uncontrollable. Faceless individuals embody domestic insecurities and fears of international extremism. In the domestic arena, immigrants are believed to be taking the American jobs and affecting the welfare of the country. In the international field, they are accused of carrying disease across the border and facilitating the introduction of terrorist forces into the United States. In an era of globalization, anti-immigration alarms have been raised not because of economic anxieties, but for political and ideological reasons. Any study of anti-immigration movements should carefully evaluate, in a combined fashion, the factors that emerge from the political as well as economic domains. Only through this kind of analysis will we be able to obtain a clear understanding of the characteristics that make anti-immigration expressions such as Lou Dobbs' nativism a living force in America.

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