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*Special Section:
Discussing Geopolitics*



Civilizations in International Relations: Huntington's Theory of Conflict

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Introduction

After the end of the Cold War, many scholars predicted the future course of world affairs. Arguably, the two most influential views were Francis Fukuyama's "The End of History" (1989) and Samuel P. Huntington's "The Clash of Civilizations?" (1993). Both men later extended their argument and published books, in which they elaborated their original theses further.¹ At first, there was much debate going on between supporters and critics of both views,² yet a few years later, globalization, the Internet, and global warming attracted more interest than theoretical discussions about an effectively unpredictable world future.

This changed with the notorious 9/11 attacks in 2001, the subsequent military intervention in Afghanistan, and the Second Gulf War. These developments revived interest in Huntington's thesis, leading to a new wave of critiques, some of which are

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¹ See the reference page, where the original articles as well as the later books are listed. In this critique we are mostly concerned with Huntington's original 1993 *Foreign Affairs* manuscript, though.

² Chiozza, 2002, p. 711, summarized the effect of the 1993 article the following way: "According to the editors of *Foreign Affairs*, the article that Huntington wrote in 1993 generated more discussion [...] than any other article they had published since the 1940s". Rose/Hoge/Peterson compiled the most important contributions to the early discussion in a 1999 edited volume. A concise summary of the most important strands within the heterogeneous group of critics can be found in Fox, 2002, pp. 417-418.

listed in the reference section of this paper.³ It should be kept in mind, though, that the former Harvard professor had originally presented his thesis shortly after the end of the Cold War. Following more than four decades of ideological conflicts between Capitalism and Communism, he was arguing in his 1993 *Foreign Affairs* article, that the main source of future struggles would be the cultural divisions between civilizations rather than ideology.⁴

In this paper we want to elucidate some of the basic problems of Huntington's concept by assessing how valid his division of the world into a limited number of "civilizations" really is. We are skeptical if the eight civilizations Huntington suggested are really homogeneous enough to be portrayed as units. While this might be the case for some, others seem to be far too heterogeneous. If this assumption is accurate or if his partition is unjustified, we would argue that the whole hypothesis loses much of its potential validity.

Contents

At the outset of his 1993 article, Huntington claims that nearly all wars up to the French Revolution had been based on disputes among monarchs; most 19th century conflicts were derived from tensions among nation-states, while 20th century hostilities since the Russian Revolution were mainly

³ We want to thank one of the reviewers of this paper for drawing our attention to Bilgrami (2003), Chiozza (2002), Fox (2002), and Said (2001), all of which provide valuable ideas, which we tried to incorporate.

⁴ One of Huntington's most severe critics, Edward Said (2001, p. 2), calls Huntington himself "an ideologist". He sees Huntington as "someone who wants to make 'civilizations' [...] into shut-down, sealed-off entities".

characterized by the struggle between incompatible ideologies (Communism, Democracy, Fascism/National Socialism, etc.). Huntington argues that future confrontations are going to be much less based on ideological (or economical) differences but derive from the cultural incongruity of civilizations. With the end of the Cold War, he states, the “principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations” and goes on to formulate his key-argument: “the clash of civilizations will dominate global politics” (Huntington, 1993, p. 22).

This being Huntington’s world view, it is surprising that he does not provide a clear definition of “the nature of civilizations” (Huntington, 1993, p. 23). Instead, he describes the term rather vaguely as “the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity” (Huntington, 1993, p. 24⁵). Huntington asserts that after the end of the Cold War, many people, having grown up in a dangerous but easy to understand bipolar world, began asking themselves, “Who are we?” In other words, citizens were looking for a new common identity and ended up redefining themselves in cultural terms. Huntington later clarified this point, saying that at a time of crisis “people rally to those with similar ancestry, religion, language, values, and institutions” (Huntington, 1996, p. 126). To him, religious identity is one of the most potent forces to form a coherent cultural unity, which is – for example – not convincing in the Western and Central European case, where the schism between Catholics and Protestants has been a source of conflict for centuries but is now considered rather irrelevant in countries like Germany.

Characterizing Civilizations

At first sight, Huntington’s idea seems easy enough to understand. However, we would argue that the main problem is how many civilizations exist and who as well as

⁵ It is therefore no surprise that Edward Said (2001, p. 1) criticized that Huntington’s whole argument “relied on a vague notion of something Huntington called ‘civilization identity’.”

what defines them.⁶ In 1993, Huntington distinguished eight major civilizations. Yet, he did not clearly specify the criteria he used to do so. According to him, a civilization may be characterized by a single religion (such as Islam or Hinduism), a nation (such as Japan), a group of nations (such as “the West”) or even an entire continent (such as Africa). If we take a closer look at the (major) civilizations Huntington distinguished, we can see that the basic concepts and categories he applied are very heterogeneous.

1. Western civilization (geographical category, subcategories: ideology, economics, politics)
2. Confucian civilization (philosophical concept, subcategory: geography)
3. Japanese civilization (ethnic category, subcategories: geography, politics, possibly religion (Shintō))
4. Islamic civilization (religious concept)
5. Hindu civilization (religious concept, subcategories: ethnicity, geography)
6. Slavic Orthodox civilization (linguistic and religious concept, subcategory: geography)
7. Latin American civilization (geographical concept, subcategory: language(s))
8. African civilization (geographical category, subcategory: ethnicity).

Even though Huntington might not have insinuated any ranking, the order in which he lists the civilizations elucidates a distinctly white American intellectual point of view. Apparently without a second thought, he puts “the West” on top, while Africa comes last, which is just one of many indications that Huntington is most concerned with the

⁶ Between 1934 and 1961, the British Historian Arnold J. Toynbee, published *A Study of History* in 12 volumes. Influenced by Oskar Spengler, he traces the development of more than 20 major civilizations since ancient times: Egyptian, Andean, Sinic, Minoan, Sumerian, Mayan, Indic, Hittite, Hellenic, Western, Orthodox Christian: Russia, Far Eastern: Japan, Orthodox Christian: general, Far Eastern: general, Persian, Arabic, Hindu, Mexican, Yucatec, and Babylonian. He also mentions four so-called “abortive civilizations” as well as five so-called “arrested civilizations”.



Figure 1. The world according to Huntington

Note: The eight civilizations include (1) Western (dark blue), (2) Confucian (dark red), (3) Japanese (bright red), (4) Islamic (green), (5) Hindu (orange), (6) Slavic Orthodox (medium-light blue), (7) Latin America (purple), and (8) African (brown). The remaining colors indicate countries which do not fit into Huntington's system of eight major civilizations, most notably Southeast Asia, Mongolia, and Turkey. Retrieved from <http://tinyurl.com/ylxrbtv>

“Western” civilization. At first glance “the West” appears to be a geographical category but has, of course, much wider implications. Following this thinking, one would assume that other civilizations had some kind of geographical denominations as well. Yet, this applies only to some of the other civilizations, most notably the “African”, the “Latin American”, and arguably the “Japanese” ones. The latter is the only example where a single nation forms its own category. If narrowly applied the “Confucian civilization”, similarly, covers only one nation, and could therefore be called a pseudo-geographical category. Still, Huntington does not call it “Chinese” but “Confucian”, thus making it the only case where a philosophical concept is used to define a civilization.

“Islamic” and “Hindu” are examples where Huntington takes up religion as the basic principle to define civilizations. While this seems to be rather convincing in the case of Hinduism because it is considered to be a mono-ethnic religion, the same cannot be said about Islam as the main factor constituting a distinct civilization. Along with Christianity and Buddhism, it has to be considered a world religion because people of various ethnicities and in different continents practice it. Finally,

in the case of the “Slavic Orthodox civilization”, Huntington reverts to two jointly applied criteria: a branch of Christianity and a language group.

Overall, the criteria to define Huntington's major civilizations are rather arbitrary, a point that Jonathan Fox (2002, p. 421-42) stresses by presenting various cases, which do not fit into this rather limited system. Huntington's entities certainly reflect cultural units, but they refer to different levels of self-identification. The use of incompatible criteria to define civilizations indicates some insufficiencies of such divisions. Furthermore, Huntington himself admits that they are not all-encompassing even though some actually overlap considerably. If we just think about the term “the West”, it becomes obvious that his world view is still based on the Cold War. Yet, there are obviously many layers of connotations involved with this terminology concerning culture, history, etc. The real question is if we can in fact talk about a unified “Western” civilization. Even between societies that seem to be close because they are predominantly Christian, there are as many differences as similarities. If we randomly compare Finland or the Baltic states with New Zealand or Malta, this becomes

obvious. It is also perplexing to see that Spain and Portugal fall into a different civilization than their former colonies in South and Central America even though cultural, political, and economic ties between the Iberian Peninsula and Latin America are still strong.

The African civilization is another example of a vague and unclear category. It is impossible to determine any common feature applicable to all African states except the fact that they are located in the same continent. In other cases, Huntington asserts that civilizations are defined on the basis of religion or culture, yet in the case of Africa there is no such linking factor. A look at the distribution of religions in Africa illustrates this. In the north of the continent, there are some Arab states which are part of the Islamic world, while in sub-Saharan Africa, Christianity is the predominant religion, which is depicted in the world map shown above where Africa is actually divided in two parts, a fact which the recent establishment of the predominantly Christian Republic of South Sudan seems to aptly exemplify. From this, it follows that there is no unified "African" civilization, which clearly shows that the usage of the geographical term "Africa" to denominate a distinctive civilization does not suffice.

As for Huntington's Islamic civilization, it seems to be as diverse as the African or the "Western" one. Differences in lifestyle, economic and political situation, and the local culture of Muslims in Europe (mostly Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Macedonia)⁷, Asia Minor (Turkey), the Arab world, the Indian sub-continent, and Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei etc.) are so huge that it seems to be a gross oversimplification to talk about one common

⁷ Muslims also live in areas most people would not consider European, but which are officially part of Europe: the westernmost region of Kazakhstan and the northern part of Azerbaijan. Bosnia is dealt with by Fox, 2002, p. 424. He stresses Bosnia's character as a melting pot where three civilizations closely interact: Half of the population is made up by Moslem Bosniaks, while over one third are Slavic-Orthodox Serbs, and the remaining roughly 15% Catholic and therefore "Western" Croats.

civilization. Huntington was apparently aware of this problem: at one point he enumerates "Western, Latin American and Arab civilizations" but continues by referring to "Arab, Turkic and Malay subdivisions" of the Islamic civilization (Huntington, 1993, p. 24). As Islam and Hinduism are singled out as forming civilizations, it would seem logical to call for a distinct Christian civilization as well. However, Huntington elaborates on "Western", "Latin American" and "Slavic-Orthodox" civilizations, without uniting them into one entity.⁸ Yet, the divide between the 80-90% Sunni and the 10-20% Shia followers is at least as important to Muslims as the differences between Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox adherents are to Christians. Another question that remains open within Huntington's system is the position of Israel and the Jews. Supposedly, Huntington assumed they belong to "the West" (Fox, 2002, pp. 422-423), thus stretching this concept to the limit.

Huntington refers to various aspects of international relations, but his interpretations are sometimes biased, as the following statement clearly shows: "Islam has bloody borders" (Huntington, 1993, p. 24). Here we can see again Huntington's above-mentioned decidedly white American point of view. He uses an incomplete picture to defend his concept. In fact, many confrontations on the edges of the Islamic world are not directly related to issues of religion or civilization at all. For example, the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh has little to do with Azerbaijanis being Muslims and Armenians being Christians. In fact, it is mainly a territorial dispute based on the fact that Nagorno-Karabakh is a predominantly Armenian-inhabited enclave in Azerbaijan. If

⁸ It is interesting to note here that Huntington apparently did not group the Orthodox churches together but separated them into Eastern and Greek. In the map presented in the text above, however, Greece is shown in the same group as the Eastern Orthodox countries. Whether this reflects Huntington's idea correctly remains open to discussion. Drawing the line between Western and Eastern Europe, Huntington, 1993, p. 31, writes: "The Velvet Curtain of culture has replaced the Iron Curtain of ideology as the most significant dividing line in Europe."

Huntington's statement about Islam holds up to any critical scrutiny at all, it is not because Muslims are aggressive or warlike people, but because Islam is a widespread religion practiced by more than 1.5 billion people worldwide, mostly spreading over the three continents (Africa, Asia, Europe) that Sir Halford J. Mackinder (1919, p. 194) used to call the "World-Island".

While the above-mentioned civilizations encompass many diverse countries, the opposite is true for the "Japanese civilization". Huntington does not provide any convincing reason why Japan forms a civilization of its own. Instead he just writes: "Japan has established a unique position for itself (...). It is the West in some respects but clearly not the West in important dimensions" (Huntington, 1993, p. 45). The question remains why other Asian countries, such as Korea, the Philippines, or Thailand are not given the same status in Huntington's system.⁹

Homogeneity vs. Heterogeneity

The key assumption of "The Clash of Civilizations?" would be applicable only if governments acted according to the (nowhere specified) principal convictions of the civilization that their nation belongs to. Nonetheless, supposing that a causal relation can be established between diverse civilizations and the handling of (armed) conflicts, that link is far from being properly demonstrated by Huntington. On the one hand, he plays down the differences between peoples belonging to the same civilization and on the other hand, oversimplifies international relations by interpreting states as representatives of civilizations on the world stage. Against this, many critics argued that conflicts are more likely to erupt within than between civilizations. Akeel Bilgrami (2003, p. 88-89) for example describes the "clash within Muslim populations as a clash between secularists and absolutists." He concludes in optimistic fashion that "sheer arithmetic suggests that democratization in Muslim

⁹ It remains unclear how many civilizations Huntington sees in total. The only small civilization he actually mentions is the "Anglophone Caribbean". See Huntington, 1993, p. 24.

societies will help end this clash in a secular direction" (Bilgrami, 2003, p. 92).

Another aspect that makes Huntington's theory increasingly doubtful is the trend towards ethnically heterogeneous societies. By now only about 10% of states can be said to be more or less ethnically homogenous.¹⁰ In an Oxford University Press publication, Sujit Choudhry (2008, p. 5) therefore wrote the following statement: "The age of the ethnoculturally homogeneous state, if ever there was one, is over." The benevolent influence of individuals to solve intercultural problems is a further aspect Huntington pays little attention to. Yet, to take just one example, a look at South Africa shows that the country's fast track out of the Apartheid regime, and thus back into the international community, would hardly be imaginable without Nelson Mandela at the helm.

Huntington (1993, p. 25) states that "civilization identity will be increasingly important in the future", but it remains unclear why he is so certain about this. Even if clashes will occur between the major civilizations, the question remains why this will be the case. Huntington explains this by saying these differences refer to our most "basic" understanding of life, which is of course correct in some cases but does not seem to be true in others.¹¹ Comparing "Western" and "Latin American" civilization,

¹⁰ See Welsh, 1993, p. 45. Out of roughly 180 states, Welsh suggests that less than 20 can be interpreted as homogenous because minorities make up less than 5% of their population. In the USA, the percentage of Hispanic, African, and Asian Americans is increasing, so that at some point in the not too distant future, their combined numbers will surpass 50% of the whole population. Japan is considered to be a homogeneous nation, but even here, foreigners account for more than 1% of the population. With the new government-sponsored "Global 30" program, which aims at attracting 300.000 foreign students, this number is bound to rise further in the long run.

¹¹ Inglehart/Norris, 2003, point out that while the World Values Surveys 1995/96 and 2000-2002 illustrate that Westerners and Muslims value Democracy equally high (approval rates: 68% - 68%), the real cultural divide can be seen in areas such as gender equality (82% - 55%), divorce (60% - 35%), abortion (48% - 25%), and homosexuality (53% - 12%).

for instance, it is hard to think about “basic” differences. Huntington (1993, p. 25) takes the fact that “the world is becoming a smaller place” as another reason why the predicted clashes are going to increase. Yet, growing interactions between different civilizations might actually relieve tensions instead of creating them. His argument that religion is most important seems convincing, at first glance. Huntington (1993, p. 27) writes, “A person can be half-French and half-Arab and simultaneously a citizen of two countries. It is more difficult to be half-Catholic and half-Muslim.” However, he fails to take two aspects into account. First, what seems to be virtually impossible to Huntington is common in Japan, where many people practice both Buddhism and Shintō. Second, while the number of religious fanatics might be on the rise, the number of atheists may also grow, thus potentially reducing this problem in the long run.

Surely, some of Huntington’s observations are valuable but his conclusions are only one way of interpreting them. One reason for skepticism is the fact that the basic character of his eight major civilizations remains unclear because his explanations do not get beyond statements of rather superficial cultural differences. Economic, political, or social factors seem to be either absent from his analytical framework or their connection to his basic thesis is arbitrary. Generally, one gets the impression that Huntington avoids mentioning anything that does not support his theory. As we have already stated, Huntington asserts at the beginning of his article, that the bloody conflicts that occurred within any given civilization during the 20th century were ideologically based. While this is true for the Chinese Civil War between communists and the Kuomintang, most of the numerous border disputes in Latin America or Africa cannot be said to be ideological. Furthermore, one has only to think about the infighting between many EU member states (most notably France and Germany) and the US administration of George W. Bush over the Second Gulf War or the European origins of both World Wars, to see that “the West” has not always been a harmonious group. The World Wars are also an example that shows

that the “kin-country syndrome”¹² that Huntington refers to, is far from being a general rule. Muslim states have also fought each other as the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988 or the participation of some (predominantly) Arab countries in the liberation of Kuwait and the invasion of Iraq during the “Desert Storm” operation in 1991 show.

In some ways, Huntington’s overall idea and his focus on a balance of power between the civilizations reminds the reader of realist international relations theory.¹³ Indeed, his reference to “the West versus the Rest” (Huntington, 1993, pp. 39-41) means that his world view can be interpreted as a set of bipolar relations, an idea that seems to be strongly influenced by the earlier binary Cold War system.¹⁴ Huntington (1993, pp. 31-32) elaborates at some length on the history of Western-Islamic conflicts. But his particular concern seems to be possible frictions between the West and the “Confucian-Islamic military connection” (Huntington, 1993, pp. 48-49), a scenario that lacks any solid basis in late 20th century international relations. Actually, many political alliances as well as conflicts have reasons that cannot be explained by the concept of civilizations, i.e., they are not based on cultural or religious similarities or differences but on other – often geopolitical or economic – reasons.

¹² Huntington, 1993, p. 35 mentions H. D. S. Greenway in relation with the “kin-country syndrome”. In his 2006 *New York Times* commentary, “The ethnic card”, Greenway described the phenomenon the following way: “But there is also a kin-country syndrome, in which nationals of one country care deeply about the affairs of another because of ties of blood, language or religion. Consider Russia’s pro-Serbian sentiments when Yugoslavia fell apart, or the early recognition of Catholic Croatia and Slovenia by Germany and Austria.” Retrieved May 13, 2011, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/09/opinion/09iht-edgreenway.html>

¹³ See Donnelly, 2000, for a discussion of this.

¹⁴ A very interesting comment in the same direction comes from Said, 2001, p. 2. Comparing Huntington’s original article with the later book, he wrote: “The basic paradigm of West versus the rest (the cold war opposition reformulated) remained untouched [...] and has persisted”.

Conclusion

Despite much criticism, Huntington's article has remained an object of attraction in academic as well as non-academic circles, and it must be said that the term "civilization" is widely used today. However, equipped with ill-defined concepts and at some points rather selective use of data, Huntington's claim to explain the future of international relations fails to survive careful scrutiny because he does not specify what factors are used to determine the eight major civilizations he presents. If one uses certain criteria in one case, the same or at least similar criteria should be applicable in all cases. This kind of consistency is lacking in Huntington's conceptual framework.

His theory was developed in the early 1990s. Therefore, it is a good example of the discomfort experienced at that time by politicians and scholars who had been busy explaining the Cold War for their entire professional life. Consequently, Huntington presents a rather alarmist vision of the future, in some ways comparable to Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (Der Untergang des Abendlandes) of 1918/22. As a result of World War I, Spengler had developed a cyclical theory of the rise and fall of civilizations. Like Spengler 75 years before him, Huntington predicted the decline of Western civilization. As one of the reasons for this, he mentions the constant progression of multiculturalism within Western societies, whereas at the same time other civilizations (and especially the Islamic one) remain – according to him – more homogenous. Due to the fact that Huntington's article is nearly 20 years old, his point of view does not take the forces of transnationalism (culture, globalization of the economy, the Internet, modern telecommunications and transportation) into account that nowadays exert influence on world politics from the individual to the systematic level.

Furthermore, empirical studies on international conflicts by Chiozza (2002) and on ethnic disputes within multiracial states by Fox (2002) for example have shown that actual developments in the second half of the 20th century do not support Huntington's thesis. Based on different sets of empirical

data, Chiozza (2002, p. 711) and Fox (2002, p. 433) conclude similarly that "state interactions across the civilizational divide are not more conflict prone" and "civilizational conflicts constitute a minority of ethnic conflicts both during and after the Cold War".

Huntington's 1993 article surely provides a thought-provoking academic hypothesis. If taken at face value, it could even create a serious political problem. Were world leaders to adopt this somehow "messianic vision" (Bilgrami, 2003, p. 88), world peace could be seriously threatened, and Huntington's speculation could turn out to become a self-fulfilling prophecy: "The next world war, if there is one, will be a war between civilizations."¹⁵ Huntington's text should be read as a stimulating paradigm of international relations, representing the immediate post Cold War era, when – according to Huntington (1993, p. 39) – the West was "at an extraordinary peak of power". Huntington's theory itself seems to be one of the results of this feeling of superiority.¹⁶

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¹⁵ Huntington, 1993, p. 39. It has to be mentioned here, though, that this pessimistic prophesy contrasts with the last sentence of his article, in which he calls on the different civilizations "to learn to coexist with each other."

¹⁶ Said ends his article, "The clash of ignorance", 2001, p. 4, with a similar argument, saying that Huntington's thesis was "better for reinforcing defensive self-pride than for critical understanding of the bewildering interdependence of our time."

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