

Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations

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Samuel P Huntington's book "The Clash of Civilisations" was described by Henry Kissinger as "one of the most important books to have emerged since the end of the cold war". It has been used by supporters of the Bush/Cheney administration as ideological support for the so-called "war on terror". But on examination the book seems combine some very obvious observations with a political agenda and a lack of the very historical and cultural awareness that such a work would be expected to contain.

Huntington's book, which was first published in 1996, has been called prophetic, particularly in the light of events since September 2001 and the so-called "war on terror".

His thesis is that the world contains roughly nine distinct "civilisations": that irreconcilable cultural and historical differences divide them; that "the West" is in danger of losing its current position as the most powerful of these; and that wars along the "fault lines" between these civilisations are inevitable.

Huntington paints his picture with a very broad brush: he has to, given that he is attempting an explanation of world history in twelve chapters. But for a book with such ambitions, it is surprisingly closely tied to its particular time and place: the first chapter is entitled *The New Era in World Politics* and is a survey of the state of the world following the collapse of the Soviet Union. And although he delves back into pre-history to find the origins of the differences between civilisations that he wants to document, most of the historical discussion is of recent events, with facts, figures and statistics to show the peril that he considers "the West" to be in at the present time.

This lack of real generality in a book that claims so much is perhaps a clue to its real purpose: it aims to motivate rather than to explain; it is more a manifesto than anything else. Indeed, the author himself admits as much, rather too honestly, in the preface:

This book is not intended to be a work of social science. It is instead meant to be an interpretation of the evolution of global politics after the Cold War. It aspires to present a framework, a paradigm, for viewing global politics that will be meaningful to scholars and useful to policymakers. [...]

In addition, no paradigm is eternally valid. While a civilizational approach may be helpful to understanding global politics in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, this does not mean that it would have been equally helpful in the mid-twentieth century or that it will be helpful in the mid-twenty-first century.

The book then goes on to trace eternal enmities between civilisations stemming from the distant past as explanations for current conflicts. Perhaps readers can be expected to skip prefaces: in any case he hoped that the book would have (as indeed it has had) an influence on the wider culture out of proportion to the numbers who actually read it. Its ideas were widely aired in the press during the wars in the former Yugoslavia and after the events of 11th September 2001. But the above quote gives the game away: Huntington's purposes are political rather than explanatory; he is interested not in discovering universal truths, but rather in finding new enemies (and new types of enmity) now that the ideological conflict with Soviet Communism has gone away.

(It may be objected that I am imputing motives here: implying that Huntington's aim in writing this book was political. I do not and cannot know whether he had a conscious political purpose in writing the book. The book had [and could be expected to have] political effects and the assumption must be that those political effects were at least considered desirable by the author. If I were to be told the author of that a "scientific" anthropological book by some 19th century British author using measurements of bones to prove the superiority of the white race wrote it with purely scientific intentions and had no political aims, I would be in a similar position.)

To the extent that cultural affinities have always been a factor in the alliances between nations, and cultural incomprehension a factor in conflicts, what he says is undeniable. But despite these elements of truth, his analysis is not convincing, and one cannot help speculating about the motives of a "prophet of the war on terror".

It is both the arbitrariness of his partition of humanity into nine sections and the shallowness of his exposition of the cultural differences between them that make this book less than convincing.

The general outlook underlying Huntington's argument is as old as humanity. Ultimately it is not very much more than: *they are different from us, so we shall have to kill them*. What counts as *different* changes over time (sometimes rather suddenly: "*Oceania had always been at war with Eastasia*"), but those who want others to fight their wars for them have always been very good at making that definition work in the interests of their own power.

People have alleged the existence of fundamental and irreconcilable cultural differences between nations and peoples since time began. An attitude towards history and international affairs based on such a theory has always existed: usually, but not always, associated with political nationalism, conservatism and religion.

But the conceptual lines that have been drawn to divide the world into separate mutually irreconcilable blocks have varied drastically over time. This kind of thinking was common in the 19th and early 20th centuries. A reader from 1858 or 1908 would not be at all surprised to find a writer dividing the world up in this way, but might

well be surprised to find no distinction being made between “progressive dynamic Protestantism” and “reactionary stagnant Catholicism” for instance (or the equivalent distinction made from the other side). Huntington’s “the West” does not distinguish between these or even have a place for this historical “fault line” that seemed so obviously the major cause of conflict for centuries. Maybe he is right: the Reformation division no longer causes wars, but perhaps that shows that distinctions of this kind are more fluid than he allows for.

Huntington doesn’t accept all European Christian peoples as part of “the West”, however: one of his nine civilisations is “Orthodoxy”. He makes the usual points about the supposedly regrettable failure of Orthodoxy to have either a Renaissance or a Reformation, but seems somehow to think that the root cause is the Byzantine Empire’s unfortunate inability to understand the modern American concept of separation of Church and State. In an extraordinarily sweeping generalisation he claims the separation of Church and State as characteristic of “the West” and writes:

In Islam, God is Caesar; in China and Japan, Caesar is God; in Orthodoxy, God is Caesar’s junior partner. The separation and recurring clashes between church and state that typify Western civilization have existed in no other civilization. This division of authority contributed immeasurably to the development of freedom in the West.

Throughout the book, of his nine civilisations, it is Islam and Orthodoxy that come in for the most denigration: perhaps not surprising given the book’s underlying political purpose at a time when the main aims of American strategy were keeping Russia weak and projecting US power into Eastern Europe, the Balkans, the Middle East and Central Asia.

Huntington’s time scales are measured in centuries and millenia. But only a generation ago someone could quite plausibly have made the same kind of points about Spain that he makes about “Orthodoxy”: explaining Spain’s nature until Franco’s death in terms of deep historical and cultural factors. They would have been wrong.

But to the extent that this book influences American policy towards Russia or the Middle East, the attitudes it contains become self-fulfilling, something we have arguably already seen.

Ultimately this is an unpleasant book, which dresses plausible prejudices in academic garb and thus manufactures consent for war.

References

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