

The 'Clash of Civilizations' and Realism in International Political Thought

Written by Davide Orsi

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DAVIDE ORSI, APR 15 2018

This is an excerpt from *The 'Clash of Civilizations' 25 Years On: A Multidisciplinary Appraisal*. Download your free copy here

The thought of Samuel Huntington, and in particular his ideas in the 1993 article and 1996 book *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (2002), have contributed to the conceptual vocabulary through which the changing international context has been examined after the end of the Cold War and the rise of Islamist terrorism. Huntington's central thesis that conflicts in the post-ideological era are fueled by differences in identity, religion or, more generally, culture (Huntington 1993, 22), has had a huge impact on the study of international politics. Some praised Huntington for his ability to forecast future trends in international affairs. After 9/11, some intellectuals even looked up to him as a prophet of the wars of the new century. In the US and in Western Europe, the notion of a 'clash of civilizations' between the West and Islam offered arguments to many intellectuals and activists, across the political spectrum, who saw in Muslim immigration and the geopolitical situations of Muslim countries a danger for a declining and confused West (among many others see Fallaci 2002). At the same time, Huntington has been loathed as the inspirer of a logic of 'us' versus 'them' that had some resonance in the policies of George W. Bush after 9/11. He has been accused of being ignorant of his own and other cultures, and to propose a static and caricature-ish description of civilizations, and in particular of Islam (Said 2001, Adib-Moghaddam 2010).

This chapter takes a different approach and starts from a different methodological presupposition inspired by the British philosopher and historian of political thought Michael Oakeshott. While trying to present to readers the political and moral thought of Thomas Hobbes, Oakeshott claimed that in order to understand a text in political philosophy one should place it in the context of the history of that discipline (1991, 223–228). In so doing, it would be possible to highlight those elements that escape from the contingencies and the darkness of the time in which philosophers were writing. Of course, in the case of a thinker so embedded in his time such as Huntington, it may appear as a bold claim to affirm the presence of theoretical elements of his thought detached from its time and place. At first glance, it seems that Huntington was more interested in offering advice to the American political elite, than to contribute to the theoretical understanding of international affairs. The questions that a book such as *The Clash of Civilizations* asks are indeed of a practical sort. However, as I hope to demonstrate in this short essay, it is possible to find in Huntington's theory of the 'clash of civilizations' some elements that are independent from the contingencies of his, and our, time and that can be linked to the history of the philosophical reflection on international affairs. These, I contend, are the elements that still appeal to readers from both the academic world and the general public.

Starting from this methodological presupposition, the aim of this chapter is to present and understand some of the main aspects of Huntington's argument as presented in the book and article on the 'clash of civilizations' (Huntington 1993, Huntington 2002). I claim that his thought can be seen in continuity with the realist tradition in International Relations and as one of the most prominent and strong critical critiques of utopianism in international political thought.

The Realist Tradition in International Political Thought

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In order to show Huntington's contribution to realism, it is first necessary to offer a brief overview of that tradition. Realism is indeed one of the most recognizable voices in international political thought and is still holding center stage in the study of contemporary international affairs (see the contributions in Orsi, Avgustin, Nurnus 2018). Historians of international political thought agree in identifying two sorts of realisms: classical and structural. The former starts with Thucydides and continues with thinkers such as Machiavelli, Hobbes, E.H. Carr and Morgenthau (Boucher 1998, 47–170); the latter is instead influenced by the 'scientific approach' and aims to reach a quantitative and certain study of politics and is based on the notion of the balance of power (Mearsheimer 2013). My contention in this chapter is that while Huntington criticized some of the central tenets of structural realism, his theory of the 'clash of civilizations' can be seen in continuity with classical realism. To this end it is worth highlighting some of the main ideas that define the identity of classical realism in the philosophical reflection on international affairs.

Notwithstanding their many differences, classical realist thinkers shared a tragic vision of life (Lebow 2003; Rösch and Lebow 2017) according to which human beings have to take difficult decisions in a condition of uncertainty and with incomplete knowledge of reality. According to this view, all humans are embedded in changing contexts with no certain guide. This conception is linked to a profound critique of all forms of universalism, according to which it is possible, by the use of reason, to reach universal moral truths. The tragedy of the human condition also lies in its inescapability. Neither human reason nor universal moral law can come to the rescue of human beings.

At the same time, human nature is conceived of as self-interested. Human nature shapes the character of any human activity and, most of all, of politics. However, this condition is even worse in international politics. It is indeed in the international realm that the real nature of politics appears in all its force. For example, this fundamental idea is at the center of the political theory of one of the most important realist thinkers of the twentieth century: Hans Morgenthau. Writing at a time when International Relations as a discipline was not established as yet, Morgenthau's declared purpose was far from that of any scholar of our time: to find the eternal truths of politics (Morgenthau 1955). To this end, he applied to the study of politics the ideas of his teacher, the German legal philosopher Carl Schmitt. In Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political*, politics is conceived in terms of power. That this is the character of politics is well represented in the description of the state of nature by Hobbes. In the *Leviathan*, the state saves human beings from the constant threat of violent death: for Schmitt's Hobbes, the authority of the state derives from its ability to protect the citizens, who, in return, give their obedience. For Schmitt, there is no distinction between politics and war and indeed politics is the continuation of war by other means (Foucault 2003). The relations among states are characterized not by actual war, but by a constant state of belligerence in which the world is divided along the lines of friend/foe (Schmitt 2008, 37).

Conflict is a constant feature of human history, and of international history in particular. As Martin Wight famously put it, in international politics, no progress is possible and if some people from the distant past returned to present and looked at international affairs, they 'would be struck by resemblances to what they remembered' (Wight 1966, 26). As a consequence, as shown by Machiavelli (1988) but also by other realist thinkers, the only morality in politics is that identified with expediency and prudence and with the interest of the political community. Good politicians are those who protect their state and increase its power. In the absence of universal moral laws, the political woman/man should use her/his prudence to face difficult situations and 'to make a friend of every hostile occasion' (Oakeshott 1991, 60).

In addition to a tragic conception of human life, and the supremacy of power over ethics, realism in modern international political thought is also shaped by what Nicholas Rengger has recently defined as an 'anti-pelagian imagination' (2017). One of the characters defining this tendency is the aversion against the hope for universal moral truths (such as that about the existence of universal rights) to be a guide for political action. Moreover, anti-pelagianism fights against the belief that human history displays progress. Of course anti-pelagianism is not exclusively a character of realist international thought and many liberal theorists, starting with Judith Shklar, share distrust in utopian thinking (Rengger 2017, Chapter six). However, it is fair to say that the polemical targets of many classical realist thinkers were the utopian projects of their own times. If we look again, as an example, at Hans Morgenthau, we see that he criticized international liberalism in world politics. Its fault is not to acknowledge the centrality of power in politics and the ubiquity of evil in the world (1948).

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To recapitulate, classical realist thinkers ground their argument on a tragic conception of human nature, and on the idea that international politics is essentially characterized by anarchy and war. Their positions often present a critique of utopianism and of the idea that international politics may be constrained by law or ethical principles, and is animated by a progress towards the best. In the following, I will illustrate the ways in which Huntington's theory of 'clash of civilizations' is related to these ideas.

Huntington's Critique against Structural Realism

As is well known, the main objective of Huntington's article and book on the 'clash of civilizations' was to offer a new paradigm to interpret world politics after the end of the Cold War. The historical events following the unexpected dissolution of the Soviet Union were redesigning world history and putting to the test established theories of international relations. Also inspired by Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Huntington believed that the events such as the war in the Balkans and Chechnya showed the inadequate explanatory power of previous framework for interpreting and understanding world politics (Huntington 2002, 29–30). What was needed was a new paradigm and Huntington offered a new way of seeing international affairs grounded on the claim that 'the great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural' (1993, 22).

A first aspect to clarify is that this does not equate to saying that before the end of the USSR and during the Cold War culture and ideas were irrelevant or did not enter the equation explaining international conflicts. It rather means that the origin and reasons of war would not be the underlining competition between superpowers – a competition that during the Cold War was not just material, but also ideological – but rather the conflict between incommensurable ways of seeing the world and ways of life, those shaped by civilizations. In a sense, Huntington claims, civilizations have always been there: 'human history is the history of civilizations' (Huntington 2002, 40). This character of history was, however, hidden under the more apparent and manifest conflict between the two superpowers and their allies. My contention in this chapter is that this vision of world politics can be better understood when seen in the context of the realist and anti-pelagian tradition in international political thought. However, if we look at both Huntington's article and book on the 'clash of civilizations' we can see that one of their main concerns was to show the inadequate explanatory force of realism, and especially Mearsheimer's theory (Huntington 2002, 37).

According to Huntington, in realist theory 'states are the primary, indeed, the only important actors in world affairs, the relations among states is one of anarchy, and hence, to ensure their survival and security, states invariably attempt to maximize their power' (2002, 33). According to Huntington, this approach is able to explain the importance of states, it does not take into account the fact that states define their interests not just in terms of power: 'values, cultures, and institutions pervasively influence how states define their interests' (2002, 34). In the civilizational paradigm, states are still important, and power politics is still shaping their actions. However, these should be conceived within certain frames of reference: civilizations. These are 'a collection of cultural characteristics and phenomena', the 'broadest cultural entity', 'the highest cultural grouping of people'. There are some common objective elements that define civilizations 'such as language, history, religion, customs, institutions, and the subjective self-identification of people' (2002, 43). In the post-Cold War era, civilizations, and in particular their religious aspects, are the source of identity and meaning for a growing numbers of individuals and groups. Therefore, they shape the decisions of states and the study of international affairs should take this into account.

As many critics have noted, Huntington's definition of civilization is so vague and generic that it is useless in the actual analysis of world politics. However, the theoretical importance of Huntington's theory in this regard lies in his criticism of the realist paradigm and its focus on material interest and power as the driving forces of international politics. In contrast to that, Huntington sees a 'cultural reconfiguration of global politics' (2002, 126), in which a country's enemies and friends are defined by cultural identity. In a sense, power and interest still guide international agents, but these are defined by cultural framework. There is a priority of culture over interest and power.

The fact that agents define their interests through the vocabulary and ideas offered by their civilization is not the only aspect of structural realism that is criticized by Huntington. The 'clash of civilizations' paradigm explains the rise of non-state actors such as regional organizations. These, as well as alliances between states, are more and more shaped by civilizations. In the post-Cold War era, states suffer 'losses in sovereignty, functions, and power'

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(Huntington 2002, 35) in favor of these larger entities. For example, in the case of the European Union, states, which committed to an 'ever closer union', despite the many problems and setbacks, have progressively given up their economic, military and juridical powers to the institution of the Union. In the 'clash of civilizations' paradigm, the essence of the European Union is cultural homogeneity (Huntington 2002, 28), which is ultimately grounded in Christianity. The fact that 'people rally to those with similar ancestry, religion, language, values, and institutions and distance themselves from those with different ones' (Huntington 2002, 126) also explained the entrance of new states into the European Union after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The civilizational paradigm is not recognized in the founding documents of the European Union and, in particular, in the *Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe* (European Union 2004) ratified in 2004. Writers of that legal text chose not to cite European religious identity and rather mention other principles such as the rule of law. However, much of the discussion in the years of the drafting process of the *Constitution for Europe* revolved around the place of Christianity in the European identity (see Eriksen, Fossum and Menendez 2004), and this is how the civilizational perspective was present in that political debate.

In sum, Huntington criticized the structural realist paradigm by affirming the priority of culture over interest and power as the core of international politics, and by arguing that, in the new era, states were losing their centrality in favor of alliances and organizations based on shared civilizational values.

The Realist and Anti-Pelagian Character of Huntington's Thought

Even though the 'clash of civilizations' thesis is critical of some central tenets of structural realism, in this section, I argue that it shares some fundamental ideas with the classical realist tradition, which I have presented earlier in this chapter.

One of the objectives of Huntington's article and book on the 'clash of civilizations' is to advance arguments against other paradigms interpreting the post-Cold War world. In 1992, Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History*, among others, thought that the idea that the end of the Cold War was the beginning of an era without conflict. In this view, the world would have been united under one sole way of life and system of values: those inspired by liberal-democracy and by Western ideas. This conception is one of the many universalist political theories inspired by the idea of progress. Fukuyama was, as is well known, inspired by Hegel's philosophy and by Kojève's Hegelian notion of 'universal homogeneous state', and considered the source of conflict to be ideological, or spiritual. Given the failure of all systems of ideas alternative to liberalism, history had reached its end (Fukuyama 2006). Another version of this view is represented by cosmopolitan theories of international politics according to which boundaries and particularist allegiances are morally irrelevant. From the increasing economic cooperation among states, communities and individuals follows the existence of a universal society in which burdens and benefits should be distributed and in which there are indeed universal human rights that are valid, beyond, and in spite of, all government bodies and legal recognitions of them (Pogge 2007, 2).

The paradigm advanced by Huntington is opposed to this optimistic vision of world politics and advances objection to the view that conflict can be overcome. In general, the very idea of a world in which there is a plurality of civilizations is opposed to the notion that there is one and only one human civilization. There are indeed some elements common to all humans: 'certain basic values' and 'institutions' (2002, 6). However, Huntington argues, history can rather be explained in the light of the divisions among humanity, such as 'tribes, nations, and broader cultural entities normally called civilizations' (Huntington 2002, 56). Not only is a universal civilization based on Western values impossible, but the instauration of a global democracy is also doomed to failure (Huntington 2002, 193). Liberal universalist projects are, after all, imperialist and overlook cultural differences in the world. There is an irreducible cultural pluralism in the world, an irresolvable disagreement on fundamental values. There is no *lingua franca* among civilizations, and democracy and human rights are meaningful to the West but not to the rest. Huntington underlined the elements that separate human beings, and the importance of an 'us' versus 'them' logic in our quest for an identity. As he writes: 'people define their identity by what they are not' (Huntington 2002, 67).

What is important is that these differences are also the source of conflict and the reason world unity remains impossible. Instead of seeing history as a history of progress, with a bright future in which culture merges and peace

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advances, Huntington sees world politics as determined by the omnipresence of conflict. As in other realist writers, at the ground of this understanding there is a negative vision of human nature. As Huntington writes,

It is human to hate. For self-definition and motivation people need enemies: competitors in business, rivals in achievement, opponents in politics. They naturally distrust and see as threats those who are different and have the capability to harm them. The resolution of one conflict and the disappearance of one enemy generate personal, social, and political forces that give rise to new ones. The 'us' versus 'them' tendency is ... in the political arena almost universal. In the contemporary world the 'them' is more and more likely to be people from a different civilization (Huntington 2002, 130).

As many other European and American intellectuals before him, this negative view of humanity is paired with a certain reading of world history, in which the cultural force of the West is declining. The world of the clash of civilization is a world seen from a declining and ageing civilization that has lost control and appeal. This decline is in territory and population, economic product, military capability, but also cultural dominance (Huntington 2002, 83–96). As is well known and as many advocates of Huntington's ideas have suggested after 9/11 and after the recent terrorist attacks in Europe and America, the decline of the West is not leading the world to greater peace. Even though Huntington does not believe that a coalition of states against the West is possible (Huntington 2002, 185), civilizational relationships are antagonistic and conflict has to be considered the *leitmotiv* of international politics.

Conclusion

Huntington developed his paradigm of the 'clash of civilizations' in an age of turmoil and to answer the practical need of a new theory for the understanding of the world. The fall of the Soviet Union was the end of a (short) century of ideological and material wars between two systems of power. Likewise, the events that followed 9/11 also required a new vocabulary and a new way of interpreting the world. From the analysis conducted in this chapter it has emerged that Huntington found this vocabulary in the classical realist tradition. Even though Huntington was deeply critical of some of the assumptions of structural realism on the sources of conflict and on the role of states in international politics, he shared with the realists some important ideas. He grounds his views on an anti-utopian attitude, which dismisses all visions of world peace, inter-civilizational dialogue, cosmopolitan society, and universal civilization. Conflict, and the division of the world between friends and foes, is considered the essence of world politics, and even human nature.

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