Huntington's Clash of Civilizations

https://www.e-ir.info/2011/08/30/huntingtons-clash-of-civilizations/

HOLLY FLYNN-PIERCY, AUG 30 2011

Huntington's basic argument is simple: "the conflicts of the future will occur along cultural fault lines separating civilizations"[1] (25). It is his use of broad concepts – language, history, religion, customs and institutions – that define and categorize these civilizations and especially religion as the most important differentiator between civilizations that is problematic. Thus, although Huntington would disagree, theoretically simple, naturally subjective and inherently problematic are arguably the best descriptions of his article.[2] While cultural explanations of world politics and global interaction do have obvious merit; its normative underpinnings combined with the wholesale labels Huntington attaches to different "civilizations" makes it difficult to "test" his analysis empirically.[3] Moreover, Huntington's generalizations and assumptions about the "new phase" of world politics that are based largely on anecdotal evidence and subjective interpretation of that evidence invites criticism.

Thus, perhaps because of its theoretical parsimony, its provocative rhetoric, or its normative foundations, since its publication in 1993 Samuel Huntington's article (and subsequent 1996 book) *The Clash of Civilizations* has been both widely criticized[4] and extensively cited.[5] The significant number of responses, and the wide-ranging nature of those responses, "from laudatory to scathing"[6] illustrates its considerable impact in a way that suggests that, despite its many and obvious flaws and assumptions, academics and policymakers have found relevance in Huntington's sweeping generalizations and macro-level analysis. Yet, the policymaking relevance of the article is also not without critique. Specifically, Sato notes,

"his [Huntington's] thesis has the potential to be extremely dangerous if taken as a prescription for making policy…judging by the number of largely critical reactions from around the world, including from the United States and Western Europe, it seems quite unlikely that Huntington's propositions will be adopted as guidelines by the world's policymakers."[7]

The usefulness of Huntington's article as a suggestion for policymaking is clearly subjective, yet this is the case with the more subjective nature of any political culture argument.

Despite its subjectivity, it would be unfair to completely dismiss Huntington's argument as "oversimplification,"[8] although this is a clearly reasonable critique given that a primary goal of political scientists is objective explanation based on empirical observation. Indeed, and perhaps not surprisingly, Huntington disagrees with his critics who accuse him of oversimplification. In relation to Gersham[9] who in a review of his book, alleges that Huntington views Islam as a "monolithic entity." Huntington responds, "I don't know how he can say that. The book emphasizes again and again the *divisions* within Islam…Somehow one gets the idea that Huntington is thinking about civilizations, and he thinks civilizations are all single, monolithic entities, which is simply not the case."[10]

In light of this disagreement, it is necessary to understand the article in the context of the revival of cultural explanations at time of his writing,[11] in addition to the overall objective. If it was Huntington's aim to describe for a policymaking audience the "new phase" of world politics following the end of the Cold War, then it is reasonable to assert that he achieved this aim by effectively offering an "us" (the West) versus "them" (the Rest) paradigm that at the time appealed to many Western policymakers; an appeal that could be used to justify both Huntington's argument and approach. There is an obvious trade-off however, between simplifying for the purposes of clear explanation and simplifying to such an extent that the nuances made possible by a micro-level analysis are completely overlooked. In

Huntington's Clash of Civilizations
Written by Holly Flynn-Piercy

constructing his theory, Huntington was on the "wrong" side of this trade-off. In other words, he overestimated the value of an entirely macro-level approach that identified eight different "civilizations," six of which are based on a single religion, which as a result neglects to consider the importance of other identifiers, in particular nationality.

In terms of assessing the significance of Huntington's analysis since 1993 (1996), it is perhaps too simplistic to argue that in the post 9/11 world where the threat of global terrorism presents a fundamental concern for world leaders, Huntington's thesis has more relevance, and in fact his assertion that "the interaction between Islam and the West is seen as a clash of civilizations" (32) has been validated.[12] A single instance of a terrorist attack, even one on the scale of September 11 2001, is insufficient to justify Huntington's thesis especially given that, as Fox notes civilizational conflict constitutes only a minority of ethnic conflict.[13] Yet, if the importance of 9/11 is evaluated in light of subsequent terrorist attacks, notably the Madrid train bombings (March 2004), the London underground bombings (July 2005) and the terrorist attacks in Mumbai (December 2008), all of which were to some extent linked to the terrorist organization Al-Qaeda, then it is possible to argue that "a clash" as Huntington describes, although not to the extent he asserts, has occurred between Islam and the West. Moreover, it is also reasonable to believe that terrorism is the most obvious of example of this clash in terms of providing evidence of a competition between contradictory cultures, values and ideals.

In reality however, these events only offer limited support for the increased relevance of Huntington's thesis largely because, and as many of Huntington's critics have acknowledged, they call into question not only what Huntington means when he refers to "Islam" and "the West" but the validity of those wholesale labels. The ambiguity and lack of nuance in Huntington's use of these terms reflects a disconnect between his theoretical argument and cultural reality, illustrated by the fact that the individuals involved in Islamic terrorist organizations constitute an extremist minority, which Huntington does not recognize. In reality the vast majority of Muslims are moderate and not hostile to Western culture and values. Thus, it is better to assert that these terrorist attacks represent a "partial" clash of civilizations, which validates this critique of Huntington and at the same time confirms the necessity of using clear and appropriate labels. This distinction is also important with regard to conflict *within* civilizations, which Huntington effectively dismisses as inferior to that *between* civilizations. The current conflict between Shia and Sunni Muslims and Kurds in Iraq and the fighting of August 2008 between Russia and Georgia over South Ossetia, demonstrate not only that conflict within civilizations occurs for reasons unrelated to religion – most important civilizational identifier according to Huntington, – but also that conflict is always more nuanced than macro-level labels such as "the West" and "Islam" imply.

In terms of the dichotomy between Islam and the West, the Mumbai terrorist attack deserves special attention with regard to Huntington's thesis. Ostensibly it seems that an attack on India, as a non-Western nation and a country with a large, but minority Muslim population would disprove his argument. If this disconfirmation is correct then this attack would be an example of conflict *within* a civilization, however this argument offers only a partial explanation of this attack. Firstly, India is a majority Hindu state; therefore the attack could be viewed, consistent with Huntington, as a "clash of civilizations" between Hinduism and Islam. [14] This interpretation seems unlikely given the sizeable Muslim population in India; more plausible is the argument that considers location of the attack as significant. Mumbai as the financial capital of India is perhaps the most Western-looking part of the country in terms of economic outlook and cultural values and in fact for this reason has for many, become representative of "the West". In light of this argument, the seemingly irreconcilable division Huntington draws between "the West" and "Islam" actually breaks down in this case. Ultimately however, the fact that the Indian terrorist attack simultaneously supports and contradicts Huntington's thesis highlights both the need for nuance and the value of a hybrid, macro and micro level approach.

Despite the wide-ranging and largely valid critiques, *Clash of Civilizations* continues to affect the thinking of scholars and policymakers alike as the "triumph" of capitalism in the post-Cold War era and a movement towards liberal democracy on a global scale make cultural differences such as language, history, religion, and customs more important as a way to distinguish between different groups. Thus, a political culture argument has clear relevance in offering an explanation of the "new phase" of world politics. Huntington's critics would not dispute this fact; they would only challenge his anecdotal assertions, level of analysis and his unquestioning construction of civilizations based primarily on religion.

Huntington's Clash of Civilizations

Written by Holly Flynn-Piercy

[1] Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Affairs* 72 (Summer 1992-1993): 22-49.

[2] Speaking to these descriptions and offering both an accurate and candid assessment of the book, Tipson perceptively argues, "His book conveys a challenge, like he wants us to refute him. Daring us, by scaring us, to doubt him or dispute him. Which is fine for academic-argument-displaying. As long as someone powerful won't act on what he's saying." See, Frederick S. Tipson, "Culture Clash-ification: A Verse to Huntington's Curse," *Foreign Affairs* 76 (1997): 166-169.

[3] Two attempts to test Huntington's thesis using quantitative data are: Jonathon Fox, "Ethnic Minorities and the Clash of Civilizations: A Quantitative Analysis of Huntington's Thesis" *British Journal of Political Science* 32 (2002): 425-434 and Bruce M. Russett, John R. Oneal and Michaelene Cox, "Clash of Civilizations, or Realism and Liberalism Déjà Vu? Some Evidence," *Journal of Peace Research* 37 (September 2000): 583-608.

[4] See for example, John Ikenberry, "Just Like the Rest," *Foreign Affairs* 76 (March-April 1997):162-3; Donald J. Puchala, "International Encounters of Another Kind," *Global Society* 11 (January 1997): 5-29; Stephen M. Walt, "Building Up New Bogeymen," *Foreign Policy* 106 (Spring 1997):176-89.

[5] A search on Google Scholar revealed that the 1993 article has been cited 10631 times.

[6] M. Russett, John R. Oneal and Michaelene Cox, "Clash of Civilizations, or Realism and Liberalism Déjà Vu? Some Evidence," p. 584.

[7] Sato Seizaburo, "The Clash of Civilizations: A View from Japan," *Asia-Pacific Review* 4 (Autumn 1997): 7-23.

[8] See James Graham, "Samuel P. Huntington's Clash of Civilizations" May 2004, http://www.historyorb.com/world/clashofcivilizations.shtml, accessed October 2010.

[9] See Carl Gershman, "The Clash within Civilizations." *Journal of Democracy 8* (October 1997): 165-170.

[10] Although Huntington cites Gersham specifically, he also acknowledges that his treatment of Islam as a monolithic entity is a criticism that "lots and lots of people have made of that book." See, Samuel P. Huntington, *Order and Conflict in Global Perspective,* interview by Richard Snyder, in Gerardo L. Munck and Richard Snyder, eds., *Passion, Craft and Method in Comparative Politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007) p.219.

[11] Speaking to this point and assessing some of the strengths of the book, Stephen M. Walt notes, "Cultural explanations are very much in vogue these days…Huntington's arguments are thus in step with current intellectual fashions, even if many intellectuals will probably recoil from some of his conclusions." Walt "Building Up New Bogeymen" p.178.

[12] For a critique of Huntington's argument in the aftermath of 9/11 see, Edward W. Said, "The Clash of Ignorance," *The Nation,* October 4, 2001, http://www.thenation.com/article/clash-ignorance, accessed October 2010.

[13] Fox, "Ethnic Minorities and the Clash of Civilizations: A Quantitative Analysis of Huntington's Thesis" p.429. Contrary to Huntington's belief, Fox finds little change in the occurrence of civilizational conflict between the Cold War and post-Cold War eras, from 36.9% to 37.8%. In addition, there was also an increase in the number of non-civilizational conflicts (from 108 to 131) in the post-Cold War era. These findings are also supported by Russett, Oneal and Cox, "Clash of Civilizations, or Realism and Liberalism Déjà Vu? Some Evidence" p.583. In their evaluation of all militarized interstate disputes between countries in the period 1950-1992, the authors conclude that rather than civilizational explanations, "traditional realist influences as contiguity, alliances, and relative power, and liberal influences of joint democracy and interdependence, provide a much better account of interstate conflict. Pairs of states split across civilizational boundaries are no more likely to become engaged in disputes than are other states ceteris paribus."

[14] According to research looking at the demography of the global Muslim population conducted by the Pew Research Center, although not a Muslim-majority state, India has the third largest number of Muslims worldwide, see http://pewforum.org/Muslim/Mapping-the-Global-Muslim-Population.aspx, accessed November 2010. In addition, according to the data (2001 census) from the CIA World Factbook, Muslims constitute 13.4% of the total population; while Hindus constitute 80.5%, see https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/in.html, accessed November 2010.

—