Does the Idea of a Clash of Civilisations Hinder our Understanding of World Politics Since 9/11?

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The statement on whether the hypothesis of a clash of civilisations hinders our understanding of world politics from 9/11 henceforth requires an investigation into how and why a descriptive account of such clash of civilisations can be deduced from constituent premises in the first instance. Since these premises concern human nature, and its relation to the formation of a society, and how they fit together in a framework conducive to producing inter-civilisational conflicts is a product of reasoning, the hypothesis arguably offers a viable model to account for the current international system. Nevertheless, even though it encompasses different levels of analysis from man, civilisation, and the world at large, it concentrates on solely cultural factors and, the ways in which they can override other sectors of analysis in the discipline of international relations do not necessarily lead to enhancing our understanding of world politics. It is therefore essential to define the term 'hinder' not only as to prevent but also to mistake how international relations can be interpreted and accounted for.

First and foremost, the model of man is a pre-requisite to understanding how civilisation is formed because to address the view of human nature according to the thesis of a clash of civilisation gives a clearer picture of how and why different civilisations may lead to conflicts and violence. The major concept of human nature in accordance with the hypothesis is self-consciousness, or self-identification, which is not static. This notion can be explained by philosophical epistemology in the sense that men gain knowledge of the world through acquaintance. Individuals gain self-consciousness by seeing and sensing such-and-such things and come to learn the sensation from the sense-data via thinking about what they see and sense[1]. At the same time, self-identification originates because individuals come together to establish a certain type of society and in so doing create 'common objective elements'[2] which distinguish them *collectively* from other societies. Hence, in this regard the thesis on a clash of civilisation paves the way for understanding the international system which is the highest level of analysis by addressing the smallest unit beneath it.

Founded upon the premise concerning human nature, civilisations as cultural entities reflect somewhat the characteristics of man. Whereas human nature is not static, so is a civilisation. As the people define and re-define identities, civilisations become a dynamic concept which evolves over a period of time[3] as a man-made, or artificial, product. Nevertheless, civilisations are not necessarily the same as states, and this shows how the idea of a clash of civilisations shifts the focus from the conventional, realist state-centric approach to what can be termed as 'identity approach'. The idea blends nicely to explain the Al Qaeda network of which members are united under the 'apocalyptic terrorist'[4] Bin Laden and, more crucially, under the Islam civilisation regardless of which state they are from. Their common objective has been to call on all Muslims to join the *jihad* against the Western occupation of Muslim lands by invoking Abdallah Azzam's quotation that 'jihad is every man's duty'[5]. As such the case of Islam civilisation provides empirical evidence that there is a strong link between identities and civilisations. Civilisations and individual human being alike share the same desire for self-preservation. While individuals exit the anarchic state of nature in order to survive by *co-operatively* organise a society and hence civilisation, in turn a civilisation as *collectively* controlled by men must be sustained in order for its members to survive. Paradoxically, similar to the Classic Security Dilemma, this gives rise to a clash between civilisations. Whereas individuals co-operate to survive, by contrast civilisations find it hard to compromise owing to different objective and subjective elements. Here the concept of identity comes into life. The notions of 'us' versus 'them' are so strong that conflicts are much likely to

arise than at interpersonal level and essentially the prospects of conflicts encapsulate economic, political and ideological spheres. Consequently the 'identity approach' refers to that pertaining to civilisations rather than personal identification methodology. Ultimately this leads to a new method of considering the interactions amongst states and non-state actors as products of civilisational identity rather than conventional realist and neo-realist view which attaches importance to states and the rise of non-state actors respectively. Such method by no means hinders the studies of world politics but instead complements it.

On the other hand, the argument in favour of the idea of a clash of civilisations is constructed upon a very shaky ground ever since from the start. Not only the premises of the hypothesis in question are in themselves controversial, but also such thesis does not cover the areas which should be analysed in order to effectively account for the functioning of the international system. In this vein, the chain of logic may seem logical but since the chain itself is not logically made then, via *reductio ad absurdum* and *ceteris paribus*, such chain of logic can be rejected as deriving logic from the illogical. The first premise on human nature and identity according to the hypothesis cannot explain satisfactorily why the mind must operate in the same way as culture[6]. This requires a deeper philosophical or, perhaps, psychological analysis as to why individuals should come to identify themselves with their own culture but against those from different ones. More significantly, since the human nature and self-consciousness as well as the identification of civilisations are dynamic, does it follow that each concept has a certain level of uniformity across different beings? Why can they not adapt or be 'acculturated' to see that world politics at large is not a zero-sum game for the struggle for a place under the sun for each civilisation, and that trans-civilisational co-operation might be the best-laid strategy for the greater good of the 'international community'? Thus, the hypothesis seems to do more harm to the discipline of international relations than good by over-generalising the behaviour of men and civilisations which leads to a rather illogical conclusion that a clash of civilisation is *naturally* predictable, if not inevitable.

The concepts of the natural and the artificial extend to the conceptions of necessity and contingencies which in reality constitute the conditions in which interactions in the international system occur. The term 'interactions' is broadly defined as states' implementation of foreign policies and non-state actors' performances in pursuit of their goals. According to the hypothesis, a civilisation is a man-made product of human being's natural effort or desire to survive, and therefore a prospect of a clash between civilisations or even within civilisations arises, reflecting prospective contradictory interests which result from diverse identities. Yet, the hypothesis ignores a possibility that other factors than the *natural* desire for self-preservation can *artificially* force a human being to do something and subsequently it is, perhaps, insufficient to necessarily cause conflicts. The hypothesis then mistakes practical conception of the world since it is rather based on the assumption that civilisations control states or, if applied to non-state actors, its members. Such-and-such identities compel actors to carry out so-and-so acts accordingly. On practical account states or non-state actors more likely control civilisations[7]. This dynamism, hence, counters the argument on the identity approach initially suggested by the hypothesis.

To relate practicality to necessity and contingencies, it can be said that the control of civilisations concerns economic, political, strategic and ideological considerations. In this sense control refers to the forces acting upon the functioning of civilisations. Hence, civilisations are controlled on prudential grounds to ensure that their survival will be the ultimate means for individuals to survive. The idea of a clash of civilisation as a result looks appealing by a scientific reasoning but in reality it underestimates the significance of contingencies. These contingencies may come in the form of war or economic alienation. Cultural factors cannot guarantee to gear decision-makers towards civilisational confrontation if that would lead them to devastation. Civilisations are then used as a mask under which other forces operate. Al Qaeda's call for jihad is not entirely derived from the hatred towards the United States but rather Islam spirituality has been exploited to unite the Arab states against the West occupation in their region. In other words, the Islamic civilisation is used out of perceived necessity that the West's interests have been furthered at the expense of theirs in the form of their voice carrying unequal weight on the world stage. The roots of the US-Islamic conflicts originated from power politics and economic benefits under the guise of civilisations, and arguably the use of terrorist activity is suggestive of 'gross imbalance of power'[8] in the world since the West has been superior in terms of military and economic strength. The thesis of a clash of civilisation therefore does not even succeed in accounting for the event of September 11.

In conclusion, the hypothesis of a clash of civilisations as '*the* fundamental source of conflict'[9] in world politics at

first glance seems to explain the event of 9/11 and the dynamic in the current international system as an 'uncannily prescient'[10] theory. However, the notion does not negate our conception of world politics outright, but the former per se is not in itself sufficient in accounting for the latter either, if not affecting it detrimentally. The hypothesis, in the final analysis, merely constitutes a single area of considerations, which is cultural, within the broader context of the discipline of international relations. After all, the idea of a clash of civilisations simply reflects an effort to establish the congruence between the so-called intellectual reasoning and human being's intuitive fear of extinction.

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Written by: Piangtawan Phanprasit
Written at: London School of Economics

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Written by Piangtawan Phanprasit

Written for: Professor Michael Cox
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