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Civilizations, Political Systems and Power Politics: A Critique of Huntington's 'Clash of Civilizations'

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In an article – and later a book – that have received more attention than perhaps any others in International Relations, Samuel P. Huntington predicted that the 'West and the rest' would clash because of differences in religion and civilization as the 'highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have' (Huntington 1993, 24). Huntington's hypothesis was that 'the fault lines between civilizations' would replace Cold War ideological boundaries as the 'flash points for crisis and bloodshed' (Huntington 1993, 29; Huntington 1996, 125).

Over the 25 years since its first publication, Huntington's essays have been widely discussed and roundly criticized from a variety of perspectives. Indeed, it would probably be fair to say that while 'The Clash of Civilizations?' made Huntington (1993) more of a household name that that of any other political scientist, it at the same time reduced his – previously stellar – standing in scholarly circles. Peers have found fault with its logic, consistency and strong tendency to simplify complex phenomena (Bottici and Challand 2006), perfunctory treatment of empirical case studies (Ajami 1993), lack of backing by empirical statistical evidence (Russett et al 2000; Henderson and Tucker 2001; Fox 2001), confounding political and social conflict with religious and civilizational confrontation (Todorov 2010), and insufficient attention to the heterogeneity of political culture within each major civilization (Sen 1999, 15–16; Voll and Esposito 1994). More broadly, many scholars have been disturbed by the blurring between purportedly dispassionate scholarly prediction and the conjuring up of civilizational animosities and discord (Herzog 1999; Tipson 1997; Bottici and Challand 2006). After the terrorist attacks of 9/11, however, Huntington received some more positive feedback (see e.g. Inglehart and Norris 2003; Betts 2010).

Twenty-five years on, what can usefully be added to this wealth of existing analysis? This chapter proposes a brief contemporary analysis of the empirical validity of the prediction – after all, Huntington's main goal was prognostic. Just as Huntington's article and book were, in essence, essays, so is this chapter. The focus is on the increasingly conflictual relations between Russia and the West as arguably the most important example of a purported 'civilizational' clash today. Can this clash be usefully analyzed in terms of discordant Orthodox and Western civilizations in line with Huntington? Theoretically, the chapter seeks to critically explore the Huntingtonian relationship between civilizations and regime types. In fact, for Huntington, civilizations are directly related to political systems, and this is important for understanding why they clash. However, the chapter argues that, rather than take a 'civilizational detour', it is more analytically fruitful to focus directly on how and why ideologically different political systems and regimes clash and how this can be circumvented. Doing so also avoids conflating regime interests and ideology from the more diverse interests and ideational viewpoints of citizens.

The Ukraine Crisis: A Civilizational 'Exhibit A'?

Huntington was primarily interested in explaining and predicting patterns of military tension and warfare. In this sense, the conflictual relations between Russia and the West can arguably be considered the most important

example of a purportedly 'civilizational' clash today. The other main contender, the bloody Middle East conflagration is, in fact, pitting non-state armed groups, states, and coalitions of states from *within* the same Islamic civilization – aided by a variety of external powers – against each other: interestingly, Huntington did not even mention the Shia – Sunni divide in his 1993 article, although he did so, albeit rather briefly, in his book. Thus, the wars across the Arab world do not, as predicted, follow from a fault line conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims (Huntington 1996, 208), but constitute primarily an intra-Muslim conflagration.[1] A second possible contender, the (so far non-lethal) tensions around the South China Sea and the Koreas, are, again, 'intra-civilizational' border conflicts or, even, pitting two parts of the same nation (the two Koreas) against each other. There is of course a clear element of great power rivalry present, but to define these in civilizational terms does not seem to add anything to a classical Realist, power political understanding of the tensions (cf. Betts 2010).

It might seem futile to attempt to counter Huntington's broad-brush theoretical framework with one single case study, not least since Huntington himself stresses the generality of his theory and the fact that it is not meant to be exhaustive or apply to each case (Huntington 1996, 29–30 and 36–37). However, if his theory cannot explain a key defining feature of the present-day international security system, its utility is put in serious doubt. Moreover, though brief, the case study illustrates how important it is to move beyond facile and hastily drawn conclusions à la Huntington. Huntington may have created a sweeping and richly illustrated account, but breadth here becomes a main weakness: scratch the surface of an at first glance plausible set of illustrative cases, and another, more complex, pictures emerges.

The conflict over Ukraine is at the heart of the souring of relations between the West and Russia. It could at first glance be offered as the perfect civilizational 'Exhibit A'. Although Huntington is inconsistent in his argumentation[2], he explains that 'the most significant dividing line in Europe' is the eastern boundary of Western Christianity, inter alia cutting through Ukraine, thus 'separating the more Catholic Western Ukraine from Orthodox Eastern Ukraine' (Huntington 1993, 30). He seems almost prophetic when he writes:

As one Russian general put it, 'Ukraine or rather Eastern Ukraine will come back in five, ten or fifteen years. Western Ukraine can go to hell'. Such a rump Uniate and Western-oriented Ukraine, however, would only be viable if it had strong and effective Western support. Such support is, in turn, likely to be forthcoming only if relations between the West and Russia deteriorated seriously and came to resemble those of the Cold War (Huntington 1996, 167–168).

In short, Crimea and Eastern Ukraine are located precisely on the civilizational fault line which Huntington predicted would be 'flash points for crisis and bloodshed', and what we are currently seeing is, indeed, a festering confrontation over these areas between Russia and the West.

However, this conclusion is too hasty. It is insufficient because it does not take into account how and why the conflict escalated in the first place. Russia was always testy on the issue of NATO and EU expansion, on grounds of power politics and spheres of influence rather than civilization (Haukkala 2015). However, it had for a number of years tolerated the European Union's Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), while trying to counter it with its own mix of soft and hard power projection (Averre 2009; Wiegand and Schulz 2015). For example, Russia had, however grudgingly, accepted EU *rapprochement* with countries in the Orthodox sphere, such as Serbia's status as an EU applicant state. Thus, Russian military intervention in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine because of a fear of Ukrainian 'Europeanization' through closer ties with the EU – which did not offer any meaningful prospect for membership – is a relative break with the recent past. Had this been a civilizational conflict, we should not logically have seen such a pronounced shift.

So what changed and led to escalation? Most authors agree that the fact that the successive successes of externally promoted so-called 'color revolutions' were creeping closer to Russian borders gradually changed perceptions in Moscow (Wilson 2010). Analysts see the extensive Russian anti-government protest movements in 2011 as a turning point: President Putin viewed them as a direct threat to the current Russian political system and hence to his own power, and, importantly, as orchestrated from the West (McFaul, 2014). The Russian regime came to fear what Western policy makers wished for, namely that 'consolidating a pro-Western, democratic Ukraine would indirectly encourage democratization in Russia' (Asmus 2008). In short, what we are seeing along the most conflictual of the

so-called civilizational fault lines is not so much a civilizational conflict as a conflict over *political regimes* and a fear both of 'regime change' orchestrated from abroad and of loss of vital parts of the Russian traditional sphere of influence.

Civilizations, Political Systems, or Power Politics: What Do States Actually Clash Over?

But could not Huntington's theory accommodate for this? After all, according to Huntington's predictions, Western and non-Western states would clash mainly over two sets of issues, neither of which are civilizational *per se*. The first set of sources of interstate tension and conflict, Huntington predicted, would be economic competition, weapons proliferation, borders and the like – in short, classical issues of power politics. The second set was likely to be human rights, democracy, and institutions, which are all related to political systems or regime types (Huntington 1993, 40–41; Huntington 1996, Chapter eight). Although this is somewhat obfuscated by inconsistencies in his argumentation[3], Huntington's basic underlying assumption was that human rights are Western values and democracy is a Western system of rule. States from other civilizations have three alternatives. They can 'band-wagon', attempting 'to join the West and accept its values and institutions' (Huntington 1993, 41). Alternatively, they can pursue, at great cost, a course of isolation from all Western economic, cultural, political and military penetration and influence. The third and most commonly adopted solution is to 'balance' the West, by modernizing economically and militarily in line with Western models, while 'preserving indigenous values and institutions' (Huntington 1993, 41). Thus, for Huntington, civilizations are very intimately related to systems of rule: Western-led economic modernization may become virtually global, but democracy, the rule of law and human rights remain Western values and institutions. As a result, the vast majority of non-Western states that choose 'isolation' or 'balancing' can potentially clash with the West over such values.

However, the argument in this chapter is that the 'civilizational detour' made by Huntington – deriving differences in regime type from civilizational differences – is both redundant and misleading. It is more analytically fruitful to focus directly on how ideologically different systems of rule clash.

The 'civilizational detour' is redundant, as fears over regime stability and survival combined with Realist spheres of influence explanations are sufficient to explain the main current purported 'civilizational' clash pitting Russia against the West as discussed above (statistical analysis of conflict patterns since the end of the Cold War have reached similar conclusions regarding the paramount importance of Realist (and to a lesser extent Liberal) explanations for warfare) (see e.g. Russett et al 2000; Henderson and Tucker 2001). Adding the contradiction between Orthodoxy and Western Christendom into the explanatory equation does not give it more power. For someone like Huntington, who is interested in parsimony and explanatory power, this is an important consideration (Huntington 1996, 29–30).

The 'civilizational detour' is also misleading. It is pointing to civilizational incompatibilities as the ultimate causes of conflict, when conflict over alternative political systems is clearly a more pertinent factor in explaining today's clash between Russia and the West. Increasingly, the West and Russia are – just as during the Cold War – pitching two alternative political systems against each other: one more strongly focused on liberal democracy, individualism, and the rule of law, the other with an emphasis on nationalism, order, and 'traditional' values. This is also manifest in the conduct of foreign policy. Thus, apart from pursuing a classical policy of economic, political, and military sticks and carrots in its near abroad, the Russian leadership is also promoting 'its' values in neighboring states, helping to maintain in power those leaders with a similar ideological outlook (Finkel and Brudny 2012). The Russian government has also supported political groupings and parties in the West – including most famously the National Front in France and the Republican candidate (now President) Donald Trump in the US – that it sees as ideologically close. In so doing, the Russian government is not promoting Christian Orthodoxy or any particularly 'Russian' values, but rather classical authoritarian values such as nationalism, conservatism and patriarchy. It is doing so in response to Western democracy promotion, a constant, if not consistently applied, feature of US and European foreign policy over several decades (Diamond 2008; Robinson 1996; Schumacher *et al* 2017). Indeed, we might be witnessing a return to Cold War patterns of competitive value promotion globally.[4]

The 'civilizational detour' is also misleading in that it conflates the interests of the rulers and those of the ruled. Just as liberal democracy, individualism, and the rule of law are not universally accepted in the West – and are indeed

threatened by several Western political actors and groups, including those supported by the regime of Vladimir Putin – so are nationalism, conservatism, and patriarchy not supported across the board in non-Western societies. Moreover, popular support for particular sets of political values undergoes important shifts over time within the same purported civilization. As noted by Russett *et al*, 'the political cultures of Germany and Japan changed radically after 1945 from their prewar fascism, in both cases becoming democratic and substantially anti-militarist. Yet both Germany and Japan remain deeply rooted in their distinctive civilizations' (Russett et al 2000, 587).

Does this mean that Huntington's policy prescriptions regarding the international promotion of democracy, human rights and the rule of law were wrong? In his book, Huntington roundly criticized 'crusading democrats' (Huntington 1996, 65), coolly noting that, historically, '[t]he West won the world not by the superiority of its ideas or values or religion… but rather by its superiority in applying organized violence. Westerners often forget this fact; non-Westerners never do' (Huntington 1996, 51). For him, 'The central problem in the relations between the West and the rest is… the discordance between the West's – particularly America's – efforts to promote a universal Western culture and its declining ability to do so' (Huntington 1996, 183). The only way for the West to shape non-Western societies in its mold would be through 'the expansion, deployment, and impact of Western power. Imperialism is the necessary logical consequence of universalism' (Huntington 1996, 310). Moreover, Western states will have other interests which will regularly trump their democratic and human rights principles, leading to hypocrisy and double standards (Huntington 1996, 184). The wiser alternative, Huntington argued, was to accept that '[t]he security of the world requires acceptance of global multiculturality' (Huntington 1996, 318).[5]

Western governments have clearly not followed Huntington's advice in this respect. Democracy promotion policies have remained a constant in their foreign policy and foreign aid toolboxes. Results have been mixed at best, with analysts regularly decrying inconsistencies and double standards, much as Huntington noted. In the academic literature, there has been considerable debate regarding the type of democracy promoted by Western states, the cautious and non-confrontational nature of democracy promotion in some recipient countries, the declining effectiveness of various democracy promotion strategies over time, the political and strategic context of democracy promotion, its potentially adverse effects on political developments in autocratic states, etc. More rarely have academics debated the future of the agenda as a whole.

The answer to the question 'should democracy be promoted in autocratic states?' might not have to be as categorical as both Huntington and Western governments would have it (Huntington wrote that [d]eep imperatives within American culture… impel the United States to be at least a nanny if not a bully in international affairs' (Huntington 1996, 226–227)). It might be better to leave to civil society the world over the task of promoting democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, thereby forging more genuine and less inconsistent agendas and partnerships across national, religious, and ideological boundaries.

Conclusions

Huntington predicted that civilizational differences – largely based on religious divides – would lead the 'West and the rest' to clash. His 'clash of civilizations' has become something of a political myth (Bottici and Challand 2006) while sparking considerable academic controversy. This chapter argues that an in-depth analysis of Huntington's argumentation reveals the importance he accords to human rights and democracy as the basic cause of division between the 'West and the rest'. In fact, his underlying assumption is that human rights and democracy are Western values. Thus, in fact, for Huntington, civilizations are directly related to political systems, and this is important for understanding why they clash.

The argument proposed here is that it is more analytically fruitful to focus directly on how ideologically different political systems clash. This becomes particularly clear in the case of the increasingly conflictual relations between Russia and the West, which is the most important example of a purported 'civilizational' clash today. With Ukraine at center stage, this conflict at first glance seems to confirm Huntington's thesis to the letter, as he identifies Catholic Western Ukraine – Orthodox Eastern Ukraine as a civilizational 'flash point'. However, such an analysis does not take into account how and why the conflict occurred: because of increasing Russian fear of externally promoted so-called 'color revolutions', in particular after the extensive anti-government protest movements inside Russia itself in

2011. President Putin viewed these as a direct threat to the current Russian political system, and as orchestrated from the West.

Thus, what we are seeing along the most conflictual of the so-called civilizational fault lines is not so much a civilizational conflict as a conflict over alternative political systems. It pits liberal democracy, individualism and the rule of law against authoritarianism, nationalism, order and 'traditional' values. At the same time, it is becoming increasingly clear that these fault lines are also found within, rather than between, so-called civilizations. Power politics and ideology, in contrast with Huntington's predictions, are alive and well. In this context, democracy promotion agendas of Western states have become more central to power politics and their future should arguably be more widely debated.

Notes

[1] The Mediterranean border between European Christendom and the post-Ottoman Islamic South (to employ a Huntingtonian vocabulary) is, in contrast very deadly. Over 12,200 deaths have been recorded during 2014–2016 in the Mediterranean (International Organization for Migration 2017). However, to analyze these deaths in terms of a religious or civilizational conflict between the two sides is hardly apposite: causes are to be found in the intra-Muslim conflagration mentioned above as well as economic and political conditions in parts of the Global South.

[2] While he generally refers to Ukraine as a 'cleft country' encompassing large groups of people from two different civilizations (Huntington 1996, 137–138 and 165–167), he at the same time claims that:

"Common membership in a civilization reduces the probability of violence in situations where it might otherwise occur. In 1991 and 1992 many people were alarmed by the possibility of violent conflict between Russia and Ukraine over territory, particularly Crimea, the Black Sea Fleet, nuclear weapons and economic issues. If civilization is what counts, however, the likelihood of violence between Ukrainians and Russians should be low. They are two Slavic, primarily Orthodox peoples who have had close relationships with each other for centuries. As of early 1993, despite all the reasons for conflict, the leaders of the two countries were effectively negotiating and defusing the issues between the two countries (Huntington 1993, 38)."

[3] Intermittently, he sees democratization as a consequence of economic development and the social and political modernization that follows in its wake. Thus, for example, he writes – in line with classical Modernization Theory – that '[m]any Arab countries, in addition to the oil exporters, are reaching levels of economic and social development where autocratic forms of government become inappropriate and efforts to introduce democracy become stronger. Some openings in Arab political systems have already occurred…' (Huntington 1993, 32) and in another instance he argues that '[i]n the former Soviet Union, communists can become democrats, the rich can become poor and the poor rich, but Russians cannot become Estonians and Azeris cannot become Armenians' (Huntington 1993, 27). Both of course imply that democratic values can well go beyond the Western sphere. There is thus, throughout Huntington's account, a tension between modernization theory and civilizational explanations for how and why democracy can arise.

[4] During the Cold War, the US, through *inter alia* Radio Free Europe and support for the Polish trade union Solidarity and other opposition groups, was trying to undermine the Soviet bloc. The USSR reciprocated through its support for European communist parties and covert attempts at trying to influence public opinion in Western states. Today, we see a return to a similar pattern of policies and activities: Russia, now a nationalistic, authoritarian and anti-liberal power, supports like-minded parties and movements in the West and beyond, tries to use new and old media to influence public opinion, etc.; the US pursues a similar policy through specific media outlets, foreign aid, and support for non-governmental organizations. After the end of the Cold War, US activities have been complemented by EU and European governmental democracy assistance programs (largely absent during the Cold War). The Western, as well as non-Western, response to international value promotion on the home turf has been mixed: some states have remained open to external value promotion activities within its borders; others have reacted by trying to restrict it.

[5] Again, Huntington is not entirely consistent, at one point noting that the US 'must forge alliances with similar

cultures and spread its values wherever possible' (Huntington 1993).

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