

# Samuel Huntington and the American Way of War

Written by Erik Ringmar

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ERIK RINGMAR, JUN 27 2020

**This is an excerpt from *The 'Clash of Civilizations' 25 Years On: A Multidisciplinary Appraisal*. Download your free copy on E-International Relations**

It is now 25 years ago that Samuel Huntington published his 'Clash of Civilizations' article in *Foreign Affairs* (Huntington 1993). In the time that has passed since then it has become abundantly clear why his argument fails. Understood as an explanation of the logic of world politics, his thesis is simply untenable. 'This book is not intended', as he admitted in the longer version of the argument, 'to be a work of social science' (Huntington 1996, 13). There is in fact nothing much that Huntington can either explain or predict. His discussion of the various 'civilizations' and their supposed features remind you of a textbook from a Chinese middle-school with its portrayal of 'the five races of mankind and their inherent characteristics'. None of this can be taken seriously. Moreover, the argument is offensive. It is offensive to be boxed into a 'civilization' and to be told that you are the same as the people confined to the same box, and that, moreover, you are sufficiently different from the people confined to other boxes for there to be confrontations between you. Well, many of us would not like to be put in the same box as Huntington. It is enough to make you want to go put on a hijab.

If, on the other hand, all Huntington ever wanted to say was that 'culture' matters, he is not saying anything original or new. Only the most doctrinaire of Neorealists ever believed that ideas play no role in world politics. The Cold War, colonialism, Putin in the Crimea, the European Union, economic development and trade, migration and global warming – it is all a matter of ideas and values; that is, a matter of culture. But the rest of us knew that already and we did not need 9/11 to remind us.

In this article we will do three things. First we will draw a distinction between 'cultures' and 'civilizations' and explain why civilizations cannot clash. Secondly, we will make use of a historical example – the Second Opium War, 1856–1860 – in order to explain how 'civilizational wars' come about. Finally, we will reflect on the place of such wars in American foreign policy and on Huntington's own role in fomenting civilizational conflicts.

### Why Civilizations Cannot Clash

'Clash', says the dictionary, is a word of onomatopoeic origin with three basic definitions ('Clash' 2017). The first meaning, closest to the sound made by the word itself, is the 'din resulting from two or more things colliding'. The second meaning is 'skirmish' or 'hostile encounter', no doubt derived from the sound two swords make as they engage. The third meaning denotes an opposition or a contradiction of some kind, such as 'a clash of beliefs' or personalities. Garments too can clash if, for example, their colors do not match. It is as if the beliefs, personalities or garments, synesthetically, made a din. Yet civilizations cannot clash, we will argue, since they are not the kinds of things which, synesthetically or otherwise, make a din when juxtaposed.

In order to see why, let us continue our etymological exposé. Compare 'cultures' with 'civilizations'. Culture refers to 'cultivation', that is, to the 'tilling of the land' ('Culture' 2017). To cultivate a plant is to care for it and to make it grow. Metaphorically speaking, what is being cultivated by a culture is the human soul – compare individuals and societies that 'flourish', 'flower' or 'bloom'. What grows always grows in a particular location and farmers are sedentary since they must stay in one place to plant the crop, water and weed it, to harvest and store it. In order to protect what we

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grow, we drive stakes into the ground and build fences which separate what is ours from that which belongs to others. Engaged in these activities, we make a place out of space. These few acres are the land that feeds us, which fed our ancestors and which will feed our descendants in turn. Cultures, we believe, can be nurtured and protected in the same fashion. A culture is always *our* culture, it belongs to people like us, the place where we live, and it identifies who we are. The solid walls that surround it safeguard our way of life and keep trespassers out.

If culture finds its metaphorical basis in agriculture, civilization finds it in exchange. A *civis* is a 'citizen', a city-dweller, and as such he or she is 'civilized' in a way that peasants never can be. City people, they will themselves tell us, are not country bumpkins. They get their food from shops, not from the ground; they have clean hands and clean clothes; they drive sports cars and drink café lattes. And while city-dwellers typically consider this level of sophistication to be a result of their personal achievements, it is really a consequence of the exchange networks to which cities are connected. It is these networks – including places located very far away indeed – that civilize them. Through the networks we come into contact with things that can be compared and judged in relation to each other, and suddenly we have a choice between better and cheaper options, between the newer and the never-before-tried. This broadens our horizons and improves our lives. This is why civilization depends on the unencumbered circulation of goods, people, ideas, faiths and ways of life. Thus while cultures require walls, civilizations require bridges. As a result, in cities we always come across unexpected things and strange people. The effect may be unsettling but also liberating. We no longer have to be confined to, and carry the burden of, our culture; we no longer have to be who we are. Civilization provides us with a means of escape. *Stadtluft macht frei*.

This is not Huntington's definition of a civilization to be sure. To Huntington a civilization is 'the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species' (Huntington 1993, 24). Civilization, that is, is a sort of super- or perhaps supra-culture. For us, by contrast, a civilization has no particular content but denotes instead a mechanism or a social practice. Civilization is a process – a *civilizing process* – which works by means of openness and exchange. Civilization, for that reason, has no particular content but operates instead with whatever cultural content the historical context provides. Take the Muslims in *al-Andalus*. They civilized Spain in the ninth century by connecting its cities to the great centers of Arabic culture in the Middle East. In fact, they connected Spain to Persian culture too, and to Indian, Central Asia, and even Chinese. As a result of these civilizing connections, the great library in Córdoba had books made of paper, not vellum, and was far larger than any library in Christian Europe; the old Visigoths came to eat lemons, play the lute and compose far better poetry; they used better plows and irrigation techniques too, and put on deodorant and brushed their teeth with toothpaste. Or consider how the entire canon of classical Greek texts, saved for posterity by the caliphs of Baghdad, was transmitted to Spain where the works of Aristotle, Hippocrates and Ptolemy for the first time became available in Latin. Europeans later came to call this 'the Renaissance'.

Islam, Huntington claimed in a statement endlessly recycled after 9/11, 'has bloody borders' (Huntington 1993, 35). This is not the case, not because Muslims are nicer than Huntington gave them credit for, but because civilizations have no borders. Borderlessness, we said, is a defining characteristic of a civilizing process. This, indeed, is why the word 'civilization' was put within scare quotes by German authors in the nineteenth century (Spengler 1927). To them, civilization was a superficial idea, something which anyone could pick up in the market place, or something, like a shirt, which you easily can change and discard. A *Kultur*, by contrast, is the very skin that contains your body; it defines who you are and cannot be exchanged or thrown away. The Germans of the nineteenth century loved their *Kultur* not because it necessarily was better than other cultures but simply because it was theirs. This was the problem with the *liberté, égalité, fraternité* of the French Revolution. Once slogans like these began spreading across Europe, they were not confined to a specific society and belonged to no one in particular. They had a universal reach – compare the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme* of 1789 – designed to appeal to the largest number of customers. There was nothing wrong with these catchphrases, but they corresponded to no lived reality.

Strictly speaking, and we are speaking strictly here, cultures cannot clash. Cultures simply exist side by side, each one rooted to its own particular soil. The fences and the walls separating them make sure that there is no mixing and no miscegenation. From this point of view a 'culture clash' is something that occurs because a person from a society with one culture moves to a society with another culture. The cultures are not moving, people are. The din of the clashes ceases when the person finally has come to adjust to the new conditions. When in Nome, we do like the

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nomads.

But civilizations cannot clash either. Exchange is an activity in which you engage freely; it is an affair between consenting adults. Exchange is all a matter of how much something costs per kilo; how many pennies for your thoughts; how many tits for a tat. And you can always refuse to make a deal. Free trade, by definition, cannot be forced (Ringmar 2011a). Markets for that reason operate as a conflict resolving device. Instead of making a big, centralized, decision which people end up fighting over, the conflict can be resolved if you turn it into a myriad of small, decentralized, decisions which individuals make for themselves. Since the civilizing process operates by means of such self-regulation, civilizations do not clash.

The problem, however, is that civilizations can come to clash with cultures and cultures with civilizations. The lived reality, to speak with the nineteenth-century Germans, can come to be exchanged for the superficial catchphrase; a person's real face for a mask; the skin for a shirt – and this, unsurprisingly, can be a cause for concern and resentment. This is how civilizational wars happen.

## Why 'Civilizational Wars' Happen

The nineteenth century was an era of colonial warfare; it was also an era of 'civilizational wars,' or what we really should call 'a clash between two cultures occasioned by a process of exchange.' The French had a *mission civilisatrice* which took their soldiers and colonial administrators from the mountains of Kabylia to the jungles of Vietnam. Meanwhile, the British shouldered the 'white man's burden' in India, in Africa, and in most other corners of the globe. The Germans, for their part, did their best to improve the lives of the indigenous population of southwestern Africa (Erichsen and Olusoga 2010). The savages must be civilized, even if it goes against their will; failing that, we must control them, and failing that, *alas*, the savages might have to be killed. And the wars intended to spread European culture have continued to this day, although we might refer to them as 'promoting democracy' or 'freedom', or perhaps as a 'duty to protect'.

Importantly, in the background of these conflicts are the culture-transforming forces unleashed by the rapid expansion of global markets in the nineteenth century. No one has written about this better than Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. It is the 'profit motive', they argued in *The Communist Manifesto*, which set the Europeans on a chase for markets around the world (Marx and Engels 1910 [1848]). And once the search for profits came to replace all other concerns, each culture was dramatically transformed. The profit motive destroyed feudal relations and replaced them with market relations; it shook up old habits, confounded established truths and toppled old gods. Culture was everywhere replaced by civilization. The profit motive 'compels all nations, on the pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst, *i.e.*, to become bourgeois themselves' (Marx and Engels 1910 [1848], 18).

The great example which Marx and Engels had in mind was the opening up of China which was expected in the wake of the Treaty of Nanjing, concluded in 1842, six years before *The Communist Manifesto* was published. 'The cheap prices of commodities', as they put it, are the 'heavy artillery' which 'batters down all Chinese walls' (Marx and Engels 1910 [1848], 18). The British business community had long waited for such access. China contained, they believed, some 350 million eager consumers – 'a third of mankind' – and if they only could reach them, enormous profits were to be made. The problem was only that the Chinese authorities refused to open up – the only trade permitted took place with the one city ('Canton') of Guangzhou in the south. This was obviously not good enough and eventually the British merchants convinced their government to go to war with the Chinese over the issue – two wars, in fact, the two Opium Wars, 1839–42 and 1856–60. Marx and Engels were wrong, in other words. Cheap prices were *not* the 'heavy artillery' which forced the walls of China to come down. Instead the walls came down by means of the heavy artillery of heavy artillery.

To the British this was not only a commercial but a civilizational war. Hiding behind their walls the Chinese had become utterly ignorant of world affairs, the British argued; they knew nothing, for example, of the remarkable inventions and discoveries which recently had taken place in Europe. China was stagnant, ruled by 'the despotism of custom', and since the country never changed, it had no history (Mill 1849, 126–127; 130). At best the Chinese were

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'half-civilized', but many Europeans considered them simply as 'barbarians'. If the country is to improve, John Stuart Mill argued in 1859, 'it must be by foreigners'. Fortunately, just such help was at hand. In October 1860, a combined Anglo-French army made it to Yuanmingyuan, a large compound of palaces and pleasure gardens located northwest of Beijing, which contained the emperor's vast collection of works of art, treasure, and a full-scale library (Ringmar 2013b; Ringmar 2011b, 273–98). First the French looted the palaces and then the British burned down the whole compound down. Some critics, the authorities back in London worried, might consider this an 'act of barbarism', but a measure of barbarism is required if we ever are to civilize the Chinese. Only a great jolt can awaken them from their stupor.

When news of the wars in China reached London, Lord Palmerston, the prime minister, was pleased. Palmerston was a liberal and a staunch defender of Britain's commercial interests abroad. In power almost continuously from the beginning of the nineteenth century, he never missed an opportunity to stress the civilizing impact of commerce. It would be 'to the great and manifest advantage of the people of China if a larger commercial intercourse were established between them and other countries' (Palmerston 1857, 1827). 'I am heartily glad', he wrote when the destruction of the Yuanmingyuan was completed. 'It was absolutely necessary to stamp by some such permanent record our indignation at the treachery and brutality of these Tartars' (Stanmore 1906, 350). 'These semi-barbarous Governments appear to deal with each other with treachery and cruelty', as he put it to parliament, 'and they are apt to think that they may act in the same manner against civilized Governments. It was, therefore, necessary to prove to them by some signal retribution that such deeds are not to be committed with impunity' (Palmerston 1843, 403–4).

Yet not everyone in England agreed (Ringmar 2011a, 5–32). Edward Smith Stanley, the 14th Earl of Derby, was a conservative critic. Derby was a Tory and a former prime minister, who was deeply suspicious of democracy but also of free trade. He had defended the protectionist Corn Laws back in the 1840s and he had no time for talk of 'civilizing missions'. Derby was proud of British liberties but believed they were rooted in British traditions and could not simply be dug up and exported abroad. It was his love of his own culture which made him respect the cultures of others. Now he defended the Chinese. 'I am an advocate', he began an hour-long speech to parliament, 'for perplexed and bewildered barbarism against the arrogant demands of overweening, self-styled civilization. I am an advocate for the feeble defenselessness of China against the overpowering might of Great Britain' (Derby 1857, 1155). Derby refused to accept that it had been necessary to destroy the imperial palaces. 'I think it likely to produce a painful and prejudicial impression against us as to the mode in which we carry on our military operations, and it appears to me to have been a mistake in point both of judgment and policy' (Derby 1861, 384).

Another critic was Richard Cobden. He was in all respects the very opposite of Derby: a radical and a self-made man, a founding member of the Anti-Corn Law League and the most vocal proponent of free trade both in and outside of parliament. Cobden believed in all the progressive causes of the day: a broadened franchise, abolition of the church rates, Catholic emancipation. He was active in the peace movement too and a supporter of disarmament and negotiated settlements of international conflicts. Cobden strongly supported the liberal values he associated with European civilization, but he was at the same time adamant that civilization cannot be spread by violent means. It is only through the power of our example that we can convince the Chinese to open their borders. Meanwhile, said Cobden, China deserves our respect: 'If in speaking of them we stigmatize them as barbarians, and threaten them with force because we say they are inaccessible to reason, it must be because we do not understand them; because their ways are not our ways, nor our ways theirs' (Cobden 1857, 1420–21).

Cultures cannot clash, we said, and neither can civilizations, but civilizations can clash with cultures and cultures with civilizations. Modeling our explanation on the example provided by the Opium Wars, we can conclude that the first step to a 'civilizational war' – 'a clash between two cultures occasioned by a process of exchange' – is taken when the political representatives of a culture feel threatened by the impact of openness and free markets and decide to protect themselves against it. The second step is taken when the proponents of free exchange oppose such measures and decide to remove them by force. The problem, in other words, is not the conservatives – the Lord Derbys of this world – they are friendly, if deeply conservative, multiculturalists. Multiculturalists are happy to live and let live and they take it for granted that cultures can exist peacefully coexist side by side. Neither is the problem the true liberals – the likes of Richard Cobden. True liberals are peace-loving free-traders who insist that exchange must be free and who trust the civilizing process to run its course. The problem is rather the liberals with access to firearms

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and the determination to use them – Palmerston and his ilk in the nineteenth century and their armed, liberal, counterparts today. They are the ones who wage ‘civilizational wars’ by barbarian means; establish democracy and human rights at gunpoint, and impose free trade by force.

## ‘Civilizational Wars’ and US Foreign Policy

After 25 years, we said, we all know what the problem is with Samuel Huntington’s ‘Clash of Civilizations’ thesis. It is bad social science, or rather no social science at all; it is as clichéd as a Chinese middle-school textbook; it is offensive since it forces people into boxes which are set in opposition to each other. Moreover, we can now add, it is dangerous and war-mongering. But in order to understand the danger which Huntington’s argument represents we need to place it in the context of the American way of war.

Compare Europe. Wars in Europe from the early modern period onwards were fought between states that all resembled each other. Culturally European states were all more or less alike and what separated them was nothing but their respective *Staatsräson* and the logic of power politics. They were constantly at war with each other mainly since the anarchical logic of their international system made it impossible for one country to trust its neighbors and since the means devised to assure peace – balances of power and alliance politics – often proved insufficient. Europeans shared the same culture – what they, and later Huntington, called the same ‘civilization’ – and among civilized people, they argued, you could expect a certain kind of conduct. Civilized people are not supposed to kill unarmed prisoners of war, for example, to loot libraries and places of religious worship, or to destroy the foundations of ordinary people’s livelihood. However, none of these rules applied in wars with people outside of Europe, and the reason was that the ‘savages’ the Europeans encountered here fought their wars by savage means (Ringmar 2013a). That is, they made no distinctions between soldiers and civilians, never hesitated to kill children or mothers or to destroy crops, orchards and animals (Colby 1927). In order to defeat such enemies, the Europeans concluded, they too had to become savages. Colonial warfare was for that reason extraordinarily brutal.

When Americans in the nineteenth century turned their backs on Europe, they turned their backs on the European type of wars. Only corrupt kings and their scheming advisers, the inhabitants of the New World decided, would quibble over *Staatsräson* and balances of power. The United States was to be a new and better kind of society, established in the wilderness of the new continent. Differently put, American society was constituted in relation to a frontier, the other side of which was inhabited by non-Europeans. The obvious question was how to relate to them. One alternative would have been Lord Derby’s multi-cultural solution. Cultures, we said, do not have to clash, and American and native cultures could quite easily have lived peacefully side by side. Another alternative would have been Cobden’s pacific exchange. The natives were eager tradesmen, after all, and their societies were also quickly transformed under the impact of world markets. But none of this was to happen. The Americans were settlers, we should not forget; they were colonizers, and soon the frontiers of their empire expanded rapidly westward (Grant 1933). As a result, all the wars in which they engaged were wars fought on behalf of their way of life. And when the American landmass finally was exhausted, the civilizational wars continued in the Philippines, Vietnam, and more recently against ‘savages’ in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Europeans fought wars on behalf of their culture too, we said, but the difference is that they took place in the colonies and the colonies were always very far away. As such the ‘civilizational wars’ came only to involve a small fringe of the population. Europeans in general did *not* follow colonial events and the colonies had *little* impact on popular conceptions of the world or on European society (Porter 2004). Returning home from the colonies, few people wanted to listen to the soldiers’ stories and instead they were often criticized for the uncivilized ways in which they treated the natives. The colonial soldiers reacted with resentment and pointed to the hypocrisy of the people at home who wanted the goal but were not willing to agree to the means (Pontecorvo 1966). A gulf separated the *troups noirs* from the general population and the former were generally considered by the latter as militaristic cranks. The Europeans still fight wars on behalf of their culture – the French intervention in Mali in 2013 is a recent example – but they are still wars of a colonial type that leave little impact on European society.

In America it did not work this way. The wars fought on behalf of American culture were not fought in some far-away colony but right at home. They did not concern the interests of a small fringe, but instead the very existence and

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survival of the country. The soldiers who returned home from the fronts were greeted as heroes and given prominent places in government; the *pieds noirs* were incorporated into the state. This established a tradition of thinking about oneself in relation to the rest of the world but also a certain American way of making war. It is simply inconceivable that someone with the mindset of a Rumsfeld, a Cheney, a Wolfowitz or a Perle would make it in European politics. In the U.S., by contrast, militaristic cranks such as these became members of the establishment. It is equally impossible, let us conclude, that someone with Samuel Huntington's mindset would make it in European academia. It is not that Europeans are from Venus and Americans from Mars; it is rather that Americans still are fighting the 'civilizational wars' of the nineteenth century.

For the past 25 years, Huntington's thesis has aided and abetted liberals with access to firearms; presenting them with suggestions, imperatives and hopes. As such his argument is likely to produce just the kinds of wars it purports to explain. It is a classic self-fulfilling prophecy.

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