

Interview - Arshin Adib-Moghaddam

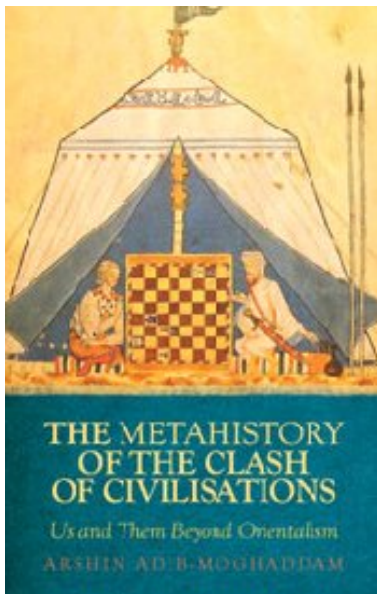
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<https://www.e-ir.info/2011/04/27/a-metahistory-of-the-clash-of-civilizations/>

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e-IR's Maysam Behravesht conducted an exclusive interview with Dr Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, on his latest book: ***A Metahistory of the Clash of Civilizations: US and Them Beyond Orientalism***.

Dr Moghaddam is University Lecturer in Comparative and International Politics of the Middle East at SOAS, University of London. He is the author of *The International Politics of the Persian Gulf: A Cultural Genealogy* (Routledge: 2006, 2009), *Iran in World Politics: The Question of the Islamic Republic* (Columbia University Press: 2008, 2010) and *A Metahistory of the Clash of Civilisations: Us and them beyond Orientalism* (Columbia/Hurst: 2011). His writings have been translated into many languages and he is a frequent contributor to leading newspapers and TV channels around the world. He can be followed via Twitter at www.twitter.com/Adib_Moghaddam.

Let's start from the very title of your book. It's quite resounding, eye-catching and significant. In what terms is your work a "meta-history"? Have you meant to develop a theoretical antithesis to Huntington's Clash Theory? And what about moving beyond us-them binary opposition?

In general, titles are misleading and sometimes they are chosen for all the wrong reasons. But I choose the term metahistory because it has a methodical significance; it indicates that the book presents a history of a History, in this case a history of the clash idea and its underlying us-versus-them dichotomy. I have been affected, as a latecomer, by Hayden White's book: *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, which had a huge impact on historiography and critical theory as it developed between different disciplines in the late 1970s and early 1980s. His critical approach to the making of history, his emphasis on the tropes and discursive constructs that amalgamate to create 'facts' and historical 'truths' has a lot to say about the foundations of our sense of history and, to my mind, the making of national and international politics as well. I see an 'anti-positivist' resemblance between the thought of White, Foucault and members of the Frankfurt School, especially Theodor Adorno. It seems to me that

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they had quite a positive obsession with smashing foundations – historical, political, ideological or other – and a healthy suspicion towards mainstream representations of ‘history’ or ‘facts’. Much in the same spirit, *A Metahistory of the Clash of Civilizations* focuses on the way the clash idea could reemerge with such intense vigor in the twentieth century and why it is that it continues to be a part of our political ‘reality’ today. There seem to be an awful lot of people who believe in some inevitable clash between Islam and the west, for instance. You find them everywhere; it is not only the fascist dastard the middle class loves to present as an exception, an aberration of ‘civilized’ society. It is within the mainstream itself where the ‘other’ is sacrificed. Given that I have thought and lived between cultures, I simply wanted to understand what it is that these clash disciples are saying and how it is that they continue to advocate xenophobia and fear, especially among the middle class. So I thought it logical to go back to the way our history has been written for us, and maybe to show that some of this is really science fiction, inventions of a specific period or mind.

Are we living in a post-orientalist era? In what ways if so?

Edward Said has given us some important answers about what went wrong in the ‘west’. But he didn’t say much about the trajectories in the ‘east’. And yet, it seems to me that ‘Orientalism’ and ‘Occidentalism’ need, beget and reinforce each other. Both are involved in a self-validating dialectic. Hence, I wanted to charter instances of ‘othering’ in both discourses. Indeed, I think there has been a rather salient image of Europe and the United States, especially in modern Islamic political thought which is why I focused on the emergence of the ‘west’ from that perspective as well.

You have cautioned that a range of political elements including academics, politicians and journalists have “habituated us to believe in the normality of conflict between ‘us’ and ‘them’.” Do you have any specific group in mind who take the clash idea for granted and thus offer strategies for confrontation with the demonized “Other”? Are there any political school or party where one may detect a denser distribution of such elements and a stronger presence of such dispositions? And why in your opinion do they continuously propound and promote the notion of an irreversible clash between potentially competing universalist modernities?

One could refer to the obvious candidates, what is rightly called the ‘ultra rightwing’ in Europe: someone like Geert Wilders who has made a political career out of his clash of civilizations rhetoric. Last year in Germany, Thilo Sarrazin, a former board member of the Bundesbank and mainstream politician, published a bestselling book arguing the degenerative effects of Muslim/Turkish/Arab immigration to Germany. The book sold nearly 2 million copies and Sarrazin was paraded as the new ‘Volksheld’ or national hero in the mainstream media of the country. Today, Muslims are the only topic about which such obviously racist material can be published with great fanfare. There are resurgent right-wing parties in Sweden, Denmark, Italy, France and eastern Europe. For them, Islamophobia is a convenient way to secure votes. They preach the clash between ‘Islam’ and the ‘west’ on a daily basis. In the United States, there is an equally disturbing anti-Islamic disposition among some quarters of the neo-conservatives and ultra-Zionist lobbyists. Ultimately, Islamophobia is a convenient way to conduct successful politics these days. It would be naïve, however, to think that belief in the inherent difference between ‘Islam’ and the ‘west’ and the inferiority of the former are confined to the fringes of society or to political extremists. Bestselling doyens of the literary world such as Christopher Hitchens and Martin Amis have also made their voices heard, and very loudly indeed. We can find influential adherents to the ‘clash of civilization’ in all strata of society, in the media, in politics, in academia. And of course, there is the mirror image to all of this: the clash disciples of the Islamic world, who have also had a stake in perpetuating the myth of an inevitable and perennial conflict between ‘Islam’ and the ‘west’, as if there exists something like a coherent Islamic world or a ‘west’ that is homogenous, mono-cultural, ethnically cleansed. This consensus is one of the main reasons why today the geography of violence is truly global; we are all suffering from it. Ultimately, inter-cultural dialogue and multi-civilizational hybridity are the common enemies of the clash disciples here and there, which is why they continuously hold on to the myths of separate origins and essentialized identities. I wanted to disturb some of those ensconced territories in the book. I mean where do we establish the boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’ these days, if not within that entirely hybrid area where our common humanity overlaps? I refuse to deny that common humanity of Arabs, Muslims, Americans, Germans, Iranians, Chinese, Hindus etc.

What is that Foucaultian “regime of truth” underpinning Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” theory? How have you

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endeavoured to challenge it? And what are the major characteristics of knowledge claims and power practices in the age of terror, fear, uncertainty and instability?

One of the main hypotheses of the book is that the theory of a clash of civilizations as it appears to us today is one of the many surface effects of a larger constellation that suggests what is essentially a myth: that there exists an inevitable clash between us and them in general and 'Islam' and the 'west' in particular. A regime of truth delivering an idea such as the clash governs its own claims which are entirely fictitious once they are analyzed and deconstructed from a meta-historical perspective. This means that our thinking about the 'other' is shaped by that colossal cultural constellation, what I call the clash regime, rather than 'our' and 'their' actual qualities. To put it simply, it is not that some clash between Islam and the 'west' is a reality, but that there exists a cultural system which suggests that we are embroiled in that conflict: If no one believes in the clash of civilizations it would cease to exist – it is as trivial as that. Some would say, why writing a book about it then? Because the case for war against the other is professionally dispersed through all layers of society on a continuous basis. People are reminded that the barbarian other is out there to get us, they are made to believe that there is a constant threat to 'our way of life'. Incidentally, this is the phrase that Tony Blair used in his testimony to the Chilcot enquiry into the war in Iraq, not in order to address the humanitarian catastrophe the invasion caused but to make a case for confrontation with Iran. So, I don't think we can afford the luxury of silence. There needs to be resistance to the bin Ladens and Geert Wilders' of this world and the prejudiced cultural system that they feed on. So one challenge of the book had to be to show how this highly salient cultural constellation accentuating conflict came about historically.

Do you mean to say that this is the central thesis or proposition of your book?

In essence, I was trying to look into that transmission belt that has delivered and sustained the clash regime until today – the most important signposts in history that have created our current predicament – not in order to overhaul the screws and bolts of that system of course, but in order to disassemble its constituent parts. To that end, I wanted to go back and to see how 'we' and 'they' were constituted during formative periods of human history, for instance during the ancient wars between Persia and Greece, the emergence of Islam, the Enlightenment and modernity, colonialism and the contemporary 'wars on terror'.

How do you characterize the structural violence apparently informing and underlying the clash regime?

I was not surprised to encounter many clash disciples along the way, on all sides; many individuals endowed with immense resources who wrote and made history in a divisive mode. I was rather more surprised to see how systematically perfect the clash regime has been reproduced in the classroom, in our language, in the media, in domestic and international politics; to see how overbearingly detailed we are coded to think about difference until today. There is a huge cultural apparatus of Orwellian proportions that induces us with ideas prone to legitimize conflict and war. This is a primary factor of the structural violence we are facing on a daily basis.

The title of Chapter 2, "The Temptations of Grammar", bears allusion to Jacques Derrida's *Grammatology* and his theory of "différance" and "deconstruction". What do you mean by "grammar" here? And what are its primary "temptations" in the theoretical framework of clash regime?

The allusion to Derrida is rather implicit and remains so throughout the book. But I thought it necessary, beyond history, to look at the way the clash thesis has been assembled grammatically. The way we speak to and about the 'other's is very important in creating boundaries. Language is complicit in the myth of separation. Conversely, language could also create empathy towards the other and yet I don't see much of that in the international media, in the pamphlets of politicians and in the mainstream discourse in the social and human sciences. So I had a look at the way some of those writers, scholars and politicians adhering to the idea that the 'west' and 'Islam' are inherently incompatible assemble their narratives. It was interesting to see that they revolve around a grammar that creates a seemingly unbridgeable distance between subject and object, a style of writing that detaches the in-group (we, us, the nation, west, Islam etc.), from the out-group (they, them, the nation, Islam etc.). Typically, one encounters

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sentences such as 'Islam is ...' or 'The west is ...', 'We are ...' and 'They are ...' etc. Then there is a causal link: 'We are what we are because ...', 'They are what they are because ...'. Thus, the territory between 'us' and 'them' is cleansed. Within such a grammar and syntax, there appear no linkages, no common field to mitigate and negotiate difference. As such, a common language of empathy based on the acknowledgement of commonalities is systematically negated.

In the book, you talk of the attempts to "objectify" the clash of civilizations theory, to materialize it. Do you mean to imply that the clash theory lacks an objective historical basis and is founded upon a "myth" turned then into "pseudo-reality"?

You are entirely right that there is no objective historical basis for the clash idea. And yet there are many people who believe in it. So simply because something is a myth it doesn't mean that it could not be politically effective and ideologically persuasive. You mentioned Foucault. He has been ambiguous on the issue of 'objectivity', which is why I bring him into dialogue with Herbert Marcuse who had a better understanding of the socially engineered 'materiality' of ideas and institutions and their 'introjective' force. Every idea, including the idea that we are embroiled in an inevitable conflict between Islam and the 'west', is concocted. But once a concoction is institutionalized, once it commands its own syntax and grammar, its own disciplinary apparatus and ideological coherence, it is out there, it claims material substance. As such, the clash of civilizations is a 'quasi-reality'. It is there external to us, and it affects our thinking on a daily basis. In order to combat it, it doesn't really help to avoid focusing on the myths it has been built upon, but to debunk them, to erode the foundations upon which the clash regime has been erected. This is one way to write a counterhistory to the clash, an oppositional discourse that fosters engagement and rational dialogue. I have been impressed by the recent publications of Jack Goody (*The Theft of History; Renaissances: The One or the Many?*) and John M. Hobson (*The Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation*) in that regard. In their studies, they have created a powerful case for multiple modernities, a common Islamo-European field and a critical approach to the canons of History.

In your deconstruction of the clash theory, you have historically departed from the ancient Persian-Greek wars and moved through the Crusades to Colonialism and War on Terror, and drawn on a vast spectrum of intellectual repertoires from Marxism and Critical Theory – Marx, Adorno and Marcuse – through post-structuralism – Derrida and Foucault – to Islamic philosophy – Avicenna and Farabi. What is the significance of incorporating ideas from Islamic philosophers, which appears the most innovative and appealing aspect of your deconstructive antithesis?

Again, much of this stems from my amazement that there has not been a truly comparative field encompassing political theory that would bring together the writings of thinkers in east and west. There are still too many people out there who believe that there is an unbridgeable difference between philosophy and political theory as it emerged in Europe and North America on the one side and western Asia and North Africa on the other. I think that such compulsive disciplinary cleanliness is part of the problem. Enter critical theory which I take to encompass post-positivist theories that are openly promiscuous, cross-cultural, and potentially cross-theoretical as well. And suddenly, Farabi can meet and greet Hegel, Adorno salutes Khayyam and the poetry of Rumi entices the political philosophy of the British or German romanticists. Now the book can't sustain the claim to present a thorough theoretical treatise that would bring all these thinkers together, but perhaps it creates the possibility to do so in the future. At least this is what it has done for me. I feel those thinkers have a lot to say to each other, and yet they are kept apart by sanitized social and human sciences that have been built around false notions of archival purity and civilizational authenticity. To bring in classical Islamic philosophy was an experiment I started in my previous book (*Iran in World Politics: The Question of the Islamic Republic*) and I continued it in this one. I found it immensely rewarding to 'pollute' the archives so to say and very useful to disassemble those colossal monoliths called the 'west' and 'Islam', not in order to obliterate them, but to establish that Muslims and Europeans, Arabs and Americans, easterners and westerners have been a part of a common historical experience. Moreover, Farabi and Ibn Sina (Avicenna) offer a beautifully hermeneutical understanding of the world that is very different from the worldview and politics of many contemporary Islamists. Yet they claim the same Islam. How could that be? What happened to political theory in the Islamic worlds? How did we get from the progressive thought of Ibn Sina in the tenth century CE to bin Laden today? How could we have kept those giants out of our heads and governing systems? How did we get from the *Bayt al-Hikmah*, 'the house of wisdom' where ancient Greek philosophy was preserved, disputed,

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reinterpreted, and Islamicised to the doctrinal *madrasas* of today? Mowlana (Rumi) reflected on the self, the individual and our common humanity over two centuries before the Renaissance in Italy. Why did we relegate him to the archives or to poetry nights? Outrageous, is it not?

The UN named 2001 the year of “dialogue among civilizations”. Ten years later, Mohammad Khatami’s world-known notion appears to have failed, seemingly buried in history. The failures of the Obama administration’s policies towards Iran and the voicing of the failure of multiculturalism by various European leaders reinforce the former. What way or strategy do you suggest out of the clash predicament? What features in the “Art of Engagement” between “us” and “them”?

I agree that there has been regression and that this regression is occurring during a period that prides itself on being the most progressive in human history. The corporatization of universities, the emergence of a predatory form of capitalism and al-Qaedaism in the Arab and Islamic world are some of the rather more recent developments that have hampered the emergence of a politics of empathy. As for ex-President Khatami: He failed exactly because he made his call for a dialogue among civilizations as a politician and not as a politically disinterested figure; the politics of Iran did not allow for his grand theme and the ‘west’ wasn’t really interested in his overtures. Khatami even suspended Iran’s nuclear enrichment just in case the dialogue among civilizations theme was not enough, and he was rebuffed by the European Union who did not follow up on their promises. This was one of the main factors for Khatami’s demise and for the resurgence of the rightwing in Iran. Of course, the foreign policies of the United States and Iran are not necessarily based on civilizational allegiance, but on what the political elites of the countries consider to be the national interest. And yet the frail body of the nation-state, both in the United States and in Iran, is too often burdened with a civilizational discourse in order to legitimate ‘leadership’. In the case of the United States, the recent wars that the country waged always also had a civilizational component; the Vietcong, the Iraqi army, the Taleban were/are presented as barbarians who have to be subdued by force. It is no coincidence that the target of imperial wars is always evil, that the ‘other’ is dehumanized. A civilizational discourse incubates an insidious form of hegemonic superiority, most of the time with racist undertones. Soldiers have to be persuaded into pulling the trigger, they have to have a great deal of animosity if not hatred of the other side. What makes matters worse, at least from an ontological perspective, is that the mainstream theories of international relations, (neo)realism at the helm of them, rationalize war as a normality of international life. There is no respite, kill or be killed, perennial anarchy; that is thought to be the inevitable and ahistorical essence of the international system. We can’t get away from conflict, or so we are told. The last chapter of the book attempts to add to the counter-cases to such pessimism. It refutes the logic of war and the calls for homogeneity, authenticity, undisturbed identity underlying the clash regime. To that end, I experiment with those fields of human endeavor – poetry and music, for instance – where dissonance does not beget conflict, where difference is mitigated, where the poetry of Omar Khayyam can be interpreted as a critical theory of the subject. So while it is necessary and prudent to acknowledge analytically that there continues to be a cultural system, a clash regime that negates dialogue and engagement, it is equally true to acknowledge that there have existed movements towards a counter-regime.

Finally, how do you perceive the current Arab awakening in the Middle East? How should it be explained? In liberal democratic or Islamic terms? Or should we move beyond these seemingly clash-oriented binary categories and seek an alternative, integrated, multifaceted, and inclusive framework for analysis? Does it really demonstrate the delusions of the “end of history” and instead represent the birth of “a new geography of liberation” as Hamid Dabashi has suggested?

Yes well, if Fukuyama thought that Hegel’s Owl of Minerva descended in his garden and brought about the end of history, he was mistaken. The second sentence of your question is crucial. The immensely important events in the Arab world are not reducible to one factor and they are certainly not driven by one all encompassing ideology. Some forms of Islamic politics are there, but we are not witnessing Islamic revolutions. Communists, secularists, liberalists are all a part of the process and none of the actors has been able to monopolize the political process yet. Indeed, the majority of the demonstrators are not driven by a coherent ideology. They do not protest for God or Marx, but against earthly matters, against corruption, dependency, subservience, indignity, torture, oppression. So whereas political activism in the ‘west’ is subdued, many people here really seem to be nauseated by mortgage ratings and soap operas, an intrusive and unjust economic system that codes them in so many microscopic ways that they hardly see

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it. I mean it is not the abundance of social justice that confines political activism in the 'west', is it? So whereas politics is monopolized largely by the state and its underbelly here, the Arab world is embroiled in a great experiment of participatory democracy, direct democracy that has created new hope for the future. But for a new geography of liberation there needs to be more than hope. At this stage, the people have created an opportunity, but not the systems and discourses to carry their project forward. It seems to me that in Egypt, for instance, a true break from the past can only be achieved if the most potent institution of the state, i.e. the military, itself is democratized. For the moment, it seems to me that this has not happened yet. But there is no need to be pessimistic – vigilant yes – but certainly not dismissive of the achievements that have already been attained. In terms of our subject matter, it is encouraging to see that these upheavals are not steeped in a clash mythology, that there is no inherent anti-westernism in all of this. Al-Qaeda is lurking in the background, and they are a factor in eastern Libya, but the vast majority of the people in the Arab and Islamic world despise their destructive ideology. That does not solve al-Qaeda's problem with the 'west' of course and vice versa. And then there is the wars in Pakistan and Afghanistan which have created a new armada of orphans whose experience in life has been framed by death and destruction. The UN reported that over 2,700 civilians were killed in Afghanistan in 2010; the war is entering its 11th year, there is still a nascent civil conflict in Iraq, the issue of Palestine has been almost entirely muted, Bahrain has been turned into an island of fear with Saudi complicity and western acquiescence and there are NATO aircraft bombing Libya. So surrounding the Arab spring there is a geography of violence in which the 'west', as an idea and an institutionalized military machinery, is entirely complicit. The pathologies of the past continue to hunt us.

Conducted and edited by Maysam Behraves, e-IR's Iranian Studies Editor.