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How the West and the Rest Are Permanently Intertwined: A Critique of Samuel P. Huntington's "The Clash of Civilizations"

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JAMES MICHAEL WILSON, MAY 25 2009

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No Man Is An Island, No Culture Remains Disconnected Forever

Although one is entering the debate started by Samuel P. Huntington rather late in the day, "The Clash of Civilizations" is still of significant relevance to thinkers in the fields of politics and international relations today. It is a matter discussed by those who are being introduced to international politics, and by those who have read the subject their whole lives. For a journal article written in the summer of 1993 to have such a lasting effect to this very day, it must be perceived that there is something intrinsically vital in it to our understanding of future conflicts and the nature of international diplomacy.

Due to the time that has elapsed since Huntington wrote his article it is easy to criticise any lack of foresight in terms of technological development, however, one feels it is important to highlight the fundamentally erroneous assumptions of modern day diplomacy made in his article immortalised in that issue of the Foreign Affairs journal. Seemingly it is not possible to fully argue for or against the thesis Huntington set forth, hence the apparently perpetual debate. The dispute is a deeply interesting point to discuss, and one feels it good to stir up the hornets' nest once again.

Huntington delivered the ultimatum that our very future existence shall be defined by conflicts between "distinct civilizations", and perhaps may result in "the next world war, if there is one," being one "between civilizations"[i]. If accurate this damning premonition would make the most foolhardy of politicians and diplomats quake in their boots – or rather suits. However, there has been no real action on the international level that could be used to justify any sort of panic. If the United Nations Security Council is taken as an example, one could not possibly say that civilization plays any role. The more pessimistic of theorists would claim it is national interests and relative gains for sovereign states that sell their wears in that circle of power. The other side, the more optimistic, say it is a body of a unified (or an increasingly unifying) global community due to the current state of globalization.

Huntington decrees that nation states will remain the "most powerful actors in world affairs", however, he maintains; "World Politics is entering a new phase." [ii] One agrees the nation state is currently the most important and dominant actor in international politics, but international organisations, regional integrations (such as the EU, GCC, etc), transnational corporations, and now even the concept of 'cyber-nations', are each indispensable to modern and future world affairs too. This challenges Huntington's thesis as they often transcend national borders, and in many cases the 'civilizational' borders he outlined.

Huntington predicted that economics will have a nominal role to play in conflicts and strains between nations,

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however, if one is to pick up any newspaper over recent months, or go to any credible news outlet online or on television, one will see the talk of 'recession', the 'credit crunch', the 'slowing of economies' and even the fear of 'global collapse', rather than any fear of international war based on hatred of those of a 'civilization' different to oneself.

Ban Ki-moon, Secretary General of the United Nations, famously stated on the day of the latest G20 meeting in London; "There is a thin line between failing banks and failing countries. We cross it at our peril." [iii] As Ban rationally goes on to illuminate, "What began as a financial crisis has become a global economic crisis. I fear worse to come: a full-blown political crisis defined by growing social unrest, weakened governments and angry publics who have lost all faith in their leaders and their own future." [iv] This highlights the worry, at the highest level, of a global trend in economic downturn, and the knock-on effect it has to world politics. Thus 'civilizations' have no work to do in this.

Furthermore, there now is talk of the recent Swine Flu outbreak and the role the World Health Organisation (WHO) has to play. This is due to the nature of a pandemic, in that it transcends national borders, and more importantly to our discussion, transcends 'civilizations'. Alan Ingram pointed out the disparity in readiness of countries for a pandemic in his editorial entitled "Swine flu calls into question the meaning of global health security" [v] posted on e-IR on April 29th 2009. The very fact that a pandemic is indiscriminate of gender, nationality or 'civilization' means the world must work together to effectively protect themselves.

To conclude the argument Huntington started with his thesis is an impossible task, however, to conclude what has been outlined above is more manageable. In this short editorial the matters raised develop points to argue against "the clash of civilizations", in that they highlight the global scale of contemporary issues.

In the future there is the possibility of the decline in the importance of the nation state. This is attributed to the proliferation of regional integrations, international organisations and online communities, many of which surpass the geographical and cultural boundaries of his 'civilizations'. This means Huntington could be incorrect in predicting the importance of the state, and how the world will be divided by 'civilizations'.

The two contemporary examples of issues that prove against Huntington's thesis one covered are the recession and the outbreak of Swine Flu. Both of which are indiscriminate of religion, nationality or, most importantly to this discussion, "civilization". Not only are the forces of nature (with influenza) against Huntington and his theory, but as Kofi Annan once stated "arguing against globalization is like arguing against the laws of gravity".

Bibliography

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[i] Samuel P. Huntington. "The Clash of Civilizations?", *Foreign Affairs Journal*. Summer 1993.

[ii] Ibid.

[iii] Ban Ki-Moon. "I fear a looming catastrophe" *The Guardian*. 2nd April 2009.

[iv] Ibid.

[v] Alan Ingram. "Swine flu calls into question the meaning of global health security" *e-IR*. 29th April 2009.

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