

“The Clash of Civilizations” and Its Unexpected Liberalism

Written by Johan Eriksson

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JOHAN ERIKSSON, MAR 6 2013

University professors often complain about how little political attention their ideas gain. Likewise, politicians often find the work of academics esoteric, abstract, and policy-irrelevant. If scholars find it hard enough to get their students and peers to read what they have written, they find it nearly impossible to make an impact in policy circles. Samuel Huntington’s 1993 *Foreign Affairs* article on “the clash of civilizations” is a noteworthy exception. Not only is it one of the most cited pieces ever written by an international relations scholar — it is also one of the most widespread in policy and media circles worldwide. While there is consensus from followers and critics alike on what arguments Huntington was attempting to make – that religion rather than ideology would become the main denominator in post-Cold War conflicts, that the world’s major religious communities are largely territorially delineated, and that these religious communities are given and cannot be changed — Huntington’s contentions stirred and continue to stir, heated debate.

Huntington not only rejected Francis Fukuyama’s then recently published piece on the end of history, and the coming victory of liberal democracy worldwide, but also reinvigorated the much-critiqued Realist worldview of the never-ending tragedy of global power politics. Huntington did so by simply replacing the clash of ideology with the clash of civilizations (read: religions).

There is proof however that the “clash” thesis has been politically utilized in a liberal and rather unexpected way, beyond, and even contradicting, the usual story about bolstering neoconservative notions of war on terrorism and Islamophobia. Surprisingly, the best example of this is how former president George W. Bush used the concept of a clash of civilizations. Bush’s foreign policy has generally been described as strongly neoconservative, following rather than refuting the idea of a clash of civilizations, citing as evidence his distinction between “civilized nations” and “rogue states”. Nevertheless, the manner in which Bush explicitly utilized Huntington’s concept conveyed elements of liberalism. In a Presidential Address to the Nation on September 11, 2007, Bush commented on his “war on terrorism” in the following manner: “this struggle has been called the clash of civilizations. In truth, it is a struggle for civilization”. This refutation of Huntington’s idea was repeated many times by Bush and his administration, including Secretary of State Colin Powell and his successor Condoleezza Rice.

This rejection of Huntington’s idea did not however mean that Bush found it useless. On the contrary, Bush’s rhetoric redefined “civilization” to distinctively liberal values such as universal freedom and democracy rather than separate religious community. This was the effect of the simple rewording from a clash *of* to a clash *for* civilization. This liberal underpinning of Bush’s foreign policy was reinforced by many other rhetorical elements of the “war on terrorism”, such as how “the force of freedom” will stop the “rise of tyranny”, and how the war on terrorism was defined as a war of ideology and ideas — not religion.

While Huntington’s pessimistic clash of civilizations presumed religious communities as static and impermeable to change, Bush’s optimistic clash for civilization presumed that communities are susceptible to fundamental value change. In his 2007 State of the Union Address, Bush argued that: “Free people are not drawn to malignant ideologies — and most will choose a better way when given the chance”. On various occasions, Bush made it clear that he believed in the transformative power of spreading ideas of freedom and democracy.

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It is noteworthy that Obama, while having redirected US foreign policy in many significant ways (emphasizing multilateralism, ending the war in Iraq, shifting focus to East Asia), actually has continued rather than changed Bush’s liberal foreign policy rhetoric. In a speech before the Turkish Parliament in April 2009, Obama stated that the United States “is not and will never be at war with Islam”, echoing Bush’s words that “the enemy of America is not our many Muslim friends.”

What the above examples illustrate is that even an explicit refutation of an idea can imply utility. In political debate, there is nothing as useful as a diametrically opposed view, target, or enemy. By sharply contrasting US foreign policy with the much-debated “clash of civilizations”, Bush used this idea symbolically, legitimating policy, and responding to critics. The ambiguity of the word civilization allowed Bush’s cunning reframing from a neoconservative to a liberal understanding. Such play on words is not always possible, and such useful “others” are not always available. Nevertheless, a broader understanding of “policy relevance” and “political utility” is called for – an understanding which includes not only direct applicability, but also conceptual and symbolic utilization.

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Johan Eriksson is Head of Research at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs, and Professor of Political Science at Södertörn University, Stockholm. Much of his research has focused on the theory-policy nexus and the politics of expertise in international relations. Eriksson has published seven books and numerous articles. For a more in-depth discussion on the political utilization of the “clash”, see Eriksson’s 2011 article co-authored with Ludvig Norman: “Political Utilization of Scholarly Ideas: ‘The Clash of Civilizations’ vs. ‘Soft Power’ in US Foreign Policy”, *Review of International Studies* 37(1). See also Eriksson’s forthcoming article “On the Policy Relevance of Grand Theory”, *International Studies Perspectives* (2013).

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