

# Deconstructing the Clash of Civilizations in the Netherlands

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### Are Civilizations Destined to Clash? Deconstructing and Overcoming the Clash of Civilizations in the Netherlands

#### Introduction

Since 2004, a *clash of civilizations*[1] between Dutch “nativists” (those who form the national community according to a liberal nationalist ideology) and Islamic minorities has raised a conundrum: is Islamic culture inherently incompatible with Western liberal, secular democratic establishments in the Netherlands? Having illustrated Samuel Huntington’s *clash of civilizations* theory, I will answer the question by examining the Dutch case through the lens of the existential security theory by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart. This analysis will uncover the crucial relation between Dutch welfare policies and the *clash*. Indeed, Ruud Koopmans’ empirical studies on Dutch welfare show that excessive “decommodification” (i.e. one’s possibility to live with welfare benefits without the necessity to rely on economic activity) triggers a vicious cycle: it fosters the segregation of minorities, which causes nativists’ existential anxiety.[2] I ultimately prove that the likelihood of a *clash of civilizations* depends largely on systemic conditions, rather than immutable cultural factors. Thus, welfare reforms can promote integration and peaceful coexistence.

#### The Clash of Civilizations Theory

Huntington divided world politics along the lines of *civilizations*: the broadest cultural categories under which nations, ethnicities and religions, and geographical regions and states unite around shared values.[3] The territorial and cultural identity of *civilizations* marks their spheres of influence and regional power. This explains why, according to Huntington, the advent of globalization has put peaceful coexistence at stake, by making the world “a smaller place”[4] with freer, broader, and faster interactions among individuals, organizations, and states. Specifically, global migration has raised levels of *pluralism*, bringing Western and Islamic *civilizations* to direct confrontation within the same “divided” societies which Huntington defines them. Accordingly, as pluralist (or “divided”) democracies confer immigrants’ equal rights to advocate their *civilization*’s interests, nativists perceive a loss of control over their public sphere. This perception, in turn, triggers what Huntington sees as nothing but the nativists’ legitimate defense of their vital space and culture, namely the *clash of civilizations*.

The rigid nationalist geometry underpinning the *clash of civilizations* explains the dichotomy friends-foes between Dutch nativists and Muslim immigrants. From a *clash of civilizations* perspective, globalization has sharpened the differences among *civilizations* by exposing them to cultural contamination, which increases the fear of subjugation. Consequently, the *clash* is a form of self-preservation.[5] Thus, as Muslim immigrants brought into the Netherlands a different *civilization*, a different *comprehensive doctrine* as John Rawls would say,[6] Dutch nativists *clashed* with them to defend their legitimate dominion over territory, resources, and societies. [7] Indeed, from a *clash of civilizations* perspective, Muslim immigration is the Islamic *civilization*’s “envious” challenge to Western superiority. In Huntington’s words:

Western ideas of individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law,

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democracy, free markets, the separation of church and state, often have little resonance in Islamic, Confucian, Japanese, Hindu, Buddhist or Orthodox cultures. Western efforts to propagate such ideas produce instead a reaction against “human rights imperialism” and a reaffirmation of indigenous values, as can be seen in the support for religious fundamentalism by the younger generation in non-Western cultures.[8]

In this light, the conflict between the West and the Rest is inevitable,[9] especially in the opposition Islam versus West. Not coincidentally, Dutch nativists have embraced Huntington’s radically Western-centric paradigm and instrumentally turned it into an anti-Islamic political ideology to justify their rejection of Muslim minorities.

## The Existential Security Argument

The Dutch *clash of civilizations* is also explained by a decrease in “existential security:” the socio-economic and psychological condition in which one does not suffer from any real or perceived threats.[10] Muslim immigration reduces the Dutch monopoly over the state.[11] Norris and Inglehart articulate this phenomenon into the security and cultural traditions axioms.

The security axiom refers to socio-economic criteria[12]; it relies on the correlation between levels of socio-economic development and perceptions of vulnerability and risk.[13] Plainly, existential security depends on environmental sustainability, wealth, physical safety, absence of conflict, and other variables. In sum, personal well-being and social/environmental circumstances must be secure enough for individuals to exercise their basic freedoms.[14] Thus, where the economy and welfare are more developed, citizens enjoy higher levels of existential security. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the correlation between development and human security is probabilistic, not deterministic.[15] One cannot predict with full certainty the levels of human security on grounds of socio-economic development because the variables affecting the measurements are numerous and case-specific.[16]

The cultural traditions axiom sustains that religious traditions are constitutive elements of national public cultures.[17] Consciously or unconsciously, religious traditions partake the formation of citizens’ identities.[18] For instance, Western liberal public cultures are partly byproducts of Catholic and Protestant traditions.[19] Hence, states reserve preferential treatments to some groups rather than others, consciously or not. For example, the Dutch government allows the existence of Christian and Jewish schools, whereas it has recently banned the wearing of Muslim headscarves in public. This happens because any long-term cultural establishment or commitment to a universal doctrine raises levels of trust and existential security within communities. Namely, the cultural traditions axiom somehow supports the idea that *civilizations’* cultural homogeneity yields existential security.

The existential security argument, therefore, relates societal (socio-tropic) and personal (ego-tropic) perceptions of well-being with levels of socio-economic and cultural development in societies.[20] Both correlations are, however, probabilistic: the possibility that unforeseen events upset existentially secure societies cannot be excluded *a priori*. [21] Similarly, despite reassuring citizens, established cultural identities do not guarantee impermeability from perceived external threats.[22] On the one hand, that implies that *civilizations* are exposed to factors of change and not immutable. On the other hand, “Under conditions of insecurity people have a powerful need to see authority as both strong and benevolent.”[23] Plainly, belonging to *civilizations* secures values which consolidate societal and personal existential security. Accordingly, I shall illustrate how perceived socio-economic and cultural “threats” triggered existentially insecure reactions by Dutch nativists (i.e. a *clash of civilizations*).

## The Crisis of Dutch Multiculturalism

The murders of Pim Fortuyn, an eccentric and charismatic leader of a right-wing political party, in 2002, and Theo van Gogh, a provocative filmmaker, in 2004, triggered the Dutch *clash of civilizations*. Yet, the process that led to the *clash* is one of increasing existential insecurity. In the eyes of Dutch nativists, the government granted Muslim immigrants “conditions of exception” for 20 years: the government gave immigrants sheltering for the five to six years needed by courts to decide about their permits to stay in the Netherlands, but denied them access to the labour market.[24] Thus, economically inactive immigrants enjoyed welfare at the expenses of Dutch taxpayers, until courts granted them permits to stay.[25] Dutch citizens perceived this increasing welfare burden as an unjust threat to their

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deserved quality lifestyle.[26] Yet, why would nativists feel existential insecure, despite high levels of welfare?

Johnston et al. found a statistical correlation between immigrants' enjoyment of welfare and nativists' mistrust in government, which is the answer to Dutch existentially insecure Islamophobia.[27] When welfare is disproportionately destined to migrants, nativists' mistrust and frustration increase. Ethnicity-based and race-based welfare policies have "racialized" and "minoritized" politics,[28] and the Dutch majority has come to perceive immigrants as "a group deserving help, respect, tolerance, and solidarity, but not the kind of people that anyone would want to employ or would want one's child to be in school with." [29] Paradoxically, such victimization of minorities has made them free-riders before Dutch nativists, and so a cause of existential stress that has translated into anxious anti-immigrant radicalism and Islamophobia. Not surprisingly, then, "For the Dutch, Muslims [came to] stand for theft of enjoyment." [30]

All Fortuyn did was to politicize nativists' existential insecurity into anti-immigrant consensus: "this is our country, and if you can't conform, you should get the hell out, back to your own country and culture." [31] These words mark the radical shift from Dutch liberal tolerance to Fortuyn's right-wing populism,[32] which forges the dichotomy between Dutch liberal secularism versus certain Islamic gender-discriminatory traditions,[33] causing anxious attitudes towards Islamic minorities. Ian Buruma describes the *clash* as "the war between collectivism and individualism, the ideal of universal rights and values versus the pull of the tribal soil, the Enlightenment versus the Counter-Enlightenment." [34]

The protagonists of the murder of van Gogh best exemplify the Dutch *clash*: Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Mohammed Bouyeri. The former is the voice of Enlightenment fundamentalism, embracing the radical defense of human rights-based Dutch liberal individualism against Islamic tribalism.[35] The latter is a young Moroccan who resists European liberalism and embodies Islamic fundamentalist, which often "commands [...] to cut off the head of anyone who insults Allah and his prophet." [36] Hence, after Ayaan Hirsi Ali asked filmmaker van Gogh to produce the film *Submission* and "show a naked [Muslim] woman of writhing on the floor, with livid wounds on her back and thighs, talking about being flogged for making love with her boyfriend," [37] Bouyeri stabbed van Gogh to death. This is the *clash of civilizations*: competing universalisms that struggle for cultural dominion. On the Western side, Hirsi Ali holds that "anything short of physical and verbal violence should be permissible," [38] including a radical condemnation of perceived Islamic gender-discrimination; on the Islamic side, Bouyeri states that *sharia* allows no true Muslim to tolerate a country where free speech insults Islam and its prophet.

Public violence shows an existential malaise on both sides of the barricade that intensifies existential insecurity and paves the way for further politicization. In fact, the Netherlands has adopted an assimilationist integration model, which defends a "Dutch Way of Life" against, for instance, Muslim headscarves because "The government believes the wearing of clothing that completely or almost entirely covers the face is fundamentally at odds with public life, where people are recognized by their faces."<sup>[39]</sup> Consequently, 60% of Dutch nativists feel uneasy about coexisting with Muslims.[40] This seems to prove Huntington's point: Dutch/Western and Islamic *civilizations* hold irreconcilable positions about law, equality and freedom, and make pluralism a trade-off.[41] Dutch nativists are increasingly anxious about Islamic conceptions of freedom and equality, which the state can hardly superimpose. Indeed, although Hirsi Ali's words and van Gogh's Enlightened satire represent fundamentalist attempts to impose Western liberal secularism on Islamic traditions, the killer response of Bouyeri remains intolerable. Perhaps Hirsi Ali uses inadequate fundamentalist tones, yet she defends what have been recognized as universal, rather than Western European, rights to free speech and equality.

## Profiling the Pluralist Citizen: Reforms for Economic and Cultural Integration

In the end, is Huntington right? Are the Islamic and the Dutch Western European *civilizations* destined to clash, given their immutable cultural features? A superficial glance at the current state of Dutch society seems to answer positively. Yet, a more careful analysis reveals that perceived cultural incompatibility largely derives from the politicization of socio-economic discontent; structural conditions have provoked an existential malaise among Muslims and Dutch. When existential insecurity erupted into public violence, ideological arguments took over the real causes of unrest and generated "block thinking:" the inability to enter a reasonable dialogue for fruitful integration and

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coexistence.[42] Consequently, existential insecurity gave issues of integration cultural and political tones, translating pluralism into a *clash*. Ian Buruma effectively describes the essence of this vicious circle:

The generosity of the state towards refugees and other newcomers can lead to a peculiar resentment. The Dutch feel, in Ayaan's words, that since they 'have been so kind' to the foreigners, the foreigners should behave as the Dutch do. Then there is the other kind of resentment, of the recipients of the Dutch government largesse, who feel that it is never enough. [43]

Plainly, abundant welfare programs for integration have created expectations in nativists and immigrants: nativists expected a repayment of their "debt" by immigrants because they had been financing their public grants and housing; immigrants expected more compensation for being excluded from the market and socially segregated. These unfulfilled expectations are precisely the reasons behind existential insecurity, block thinking and reciprocal hostility.

The *clash* is, therefore, a problem of failed socio-economic integration, rather than incompatible *civilizations*. But how can an existentially secure equilibrium point be achieved, if Muslims are perceived as illiberal and anti-West?[44] To begin with, as Tariq Moodod explains, minorities' demands for more conscious and political citizenship, rather than traditionally more passive one, should be satisfied.[45] Minorities, contrarily to stigmas, claim political participation because social segregation denies them the possibility to voice their concerns, paving the way for exasperated and extreme actions, such as Bouyeri's. The state must also incentivize minorities' engagement in the labour market and in the national culture and society, in the civic public sphere.[46] Both these levels of integration are necessary to building democratic solidarity and trust between minorities and the majority.[47] Not coincidentally, Johnston et al. find that citizens' perception of immigrants affects levels of welfare and democratic governance.[48] For democracy to work, integration and citizenship must be reformed both economically and culturally.

Evidence suggests that when nativists perceive welfare grants to immigrants to be excessive, they lose trust in the state, contribute less to public welfare[49], and develop xenophobia.[50] In fact, the Dutch *clash* originated from failed welfare paternalism that eroded nativists' existential security.[51] Koopmans' study of the Dutch case hypothesizes that "in a welfare context, multiculturalism may not be beneficial for immigrants at all, because it may lead to dependence on welfare-state arrangements and thereby to social and economic marginalization." [52]

Empirical findings prove Koopmans right. With the highest degree of welfare decommodification (i.e. one's possibility to live by relying on welfare benefits without the necessity to work)[53] in Europe, the Netherlands is the worst in terms of integration. That happens because: first, high decommodification attracts less skilled and educated immigrants, who hardly integrate yet burden the welfare system;[54] second, in high decommodification systems, immigrants do not invest in developing their human capital but adapt to lower living standards;[55] third, high decommodification creates and reinforces nativists' and immigrants' perceptions of deprivation[56] because lack of incentives to integrate widens the socio-economic gap between immigrants and nativists.

The implications of high decommodification are, ultimately, the real trigger of the Dutch *clash*. First, generous multicultural policies, which promote ethnicity-based and language-based autonomy for minorities, are associated with migrants' low participation in the labour market.[57] Second, high decommodification, and not immigrant's will, is the primary cause of residential segregation.[58] To illustrate, Turkish minorities in the Netherlands are less economically active and proficient in the use of the majority language, than French Turks and German Turks.[59] That happens especially because the Dutch system gives minorities no incentives to be proactive in integration, since it provides minorities with shelter, financial support and a wide set of other welfare benefits. Evidently, there is a connection between the degree of welfare decommodification and the integration of minorities. Hence, the structure of the welfare system is a crucial variable in determining the relationship between minorities and the majority. Differential treatment of minorities gives nativists the perception that immigrants receive "undeserved" benefits without returning. This generates nativists' existential frustration, the seed of the *clash*.

In the light of these findings, moderate welfare, such as in the UK, provides a model for more effective

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integration.[60] If enforced at an efficient level of decommodification, socio-economic multiculturalist policies can serve integration by promoting the recognition of minorities' identity, which is necessary to establish reasonable levels of existential security among minorities. Minimum-level welfare (i.e. basic health care and public education) is required to support integration, but long-term sheltering and monthly provisions ought to be reduced, since they encourage segregation. Thus, a more competitive socio-economic integration system that pushes minorities to face the trade-off between poverty and segregation and integration seems necessary. A tougher and more competitive integration system represents the empirical compromise to overcome the *clash*.

A more engaging model of citizenship makes residency and language proficiency logical criteria for integration. In Western Europe, the average residency requirement for citizenship acquisition is seven years,[61] despite degree of variation.[62] Residency requirements are the least controversial, since they are widely recognized as reasonable and necessary.[63] A more debated, but, to me, necessary requirement is language proficiency. Undeniably, individuals' ability to proactively integrate in society depends on their language proficiency.[64]

Language acquisition is even more fundamental in an integration process, where the primary role of citizens is to participate in the public process of will-formation. Prominent voices, such as Joseph Carens, argue that language acquisition should not be a legal requirement, but a desired norm, an expectation of nativists in migrants' regards.[65] Although similar ethical arguments might be relevant, language proficiency is empirically needed for a functioning democratic society. What is really debatable is the necessity of civic and cultural tests, which the nationalist approach to citizenship deems necessary.[66] Indeed, if civic knowledge might be propaedeutic to prepare new citizens for voting, one must remember that nativists are often unprepared in terms of civic and national culture. Lastly, making knowledge of national culture mandatory is ethically problematic, as it represents an aggressive assimilationist approach to integration, which presupposes the forced adoption of the majority culture at the expense of the minority one.[67]

## Conclusion

The *clash of civilizations* theory assumes that a cultural, social and political strife between the West and Islam is inevitable, given these *civilizations'* inherently antagonistic worldviews. Deconstructing the *clash* through the existential security theory, however, reveals that economic and social factors are crucial triggers of hostilities between Islamic minorities and Dutch/Western nativists. The *clash of civilizations* argument is an instrumental justification of existential insecurity deriving from systemic conditions. So, how to move beyond the *clash of civilizations*? To tear down the walls of block thinking[68], the state must implement enable and encourage minorities to participate, since evidence shows that welfare decommodification causes minorities' socio-economic segregation while frustrating nativists, who pay welfare benefits without compensation.

Hence, I propose integration and citizenship reforms that promote immigrants' engagement in the labour market and in the national culture. More economically, active minorities reduce Dutch nativists' perception of immigrants as free-riders on the welfare state. Simultaneously, language acquisition promotes more effective integration, for proficiency in language favors citizens' participation in democratic dialogue. Overcoming the *clash* depends on the ability of citizens from various *civilizations* to understand each other and find compromises for coexistence. Reshaping *civilizations* takes the long and patient work of history. Yet, not only does this analysis show that reconciliation is possible, but it also proposes systemic changes to accelerate the process.

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