Is Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" a Self-fulfilled Prophecy?
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CLARA ASSUMPçãO, JAN 29 2020

Over 25 years have gone by since Samuel P. Huntington published his controversial essay on a supposed "Clash of Civilizations" that would take over the world after the end of the Cold War. A quarter of a century later, much has been discussed about his theory and many criticisms have been put forth. One point, however, cannot be denied: Huntington's paradigm is still heavily influential to much of the world politics to this day. The goal of this essay is not to analyse Huntington's paradigm in detail nor is it to criticise its many flaws. Both of those endeavours have been undertaken to exhaustion in the past two decades and a half. What this essay aims to do, however, is to understand to which point the Clash of Civilizations framework, albeit ultimately flawed, reductionist,[1] and not grounded on actual social science,[2] still shapes public opinion, influences politics and guides the relations and mutual perceptions between the Middle East and the West. In order to do that, this essay is separated into three main parts.

First, the Clash of Civilizations theory will be briefly introduced and framed as a socio-political paradigm, taking into consideration its background and goals. Then, some of its main criticism will be concisely presented with the sole purpose of contextualising the discussions around the theory. As stated above, this piece does not aim to discuss the contested scientific accuracy of Huntington's piece, but only its consequences in contemporary policies and politics. Accordingly, the second part aims to analyse the contemporary reverberations of the Clash of Civilizations and how it is being used as a convenient lens through which to frame radicalisation. So as to further this aim, I will contextualise the analysis within the Constructivist paradigm of International Relations, which highlights the co-construction between structure and actor. Under this critical understanding of world politics, a framework's usefulness is not based on its accuracy, but on its ability to influence and shape opinions and actions. Thus, I will localise the analysis of the Clash of Civilizations paradigm within this understanding and I will highlight how Orientalist – and Occidentalist[3] – understandings of the world, both backed by Huntington's theory, are useful to legitimise radicalism in both the so-called "West" and in the Middle East. Finally, the third part aims to prove the influence of the paradigm in today's politics by localising its role in shaping the discourse of two very significant actors: The United States and the Islamic State. The United States (US) is arguably the most powerful state in the world, and a clear depiction of a Western society no matter which contested definition of the term is applied. The Islamic State (IS), on the other hand, was for many years one of the most prominent non-state contester of Western influence in the Middle East,[4] and a big exponent of extremist Islamist ideology. As the US is taken by right-wing populists who base their public discourse on anti-Islamism,[5] and as IS propaganda openly defines itself in irreconcilable opposition to the West,[6] the Clash of Civilizations paradigm resurfaces as an influential self-fulfilled prophecy both shaping and explaining contemporary discourses and actions.

The "Clash of Civilizations" paradigm

Bernard Lewis coined the concept of a clash between civilisations in 1957, arguing that Islam and the West had irreconcilable values that could only be resolved through conflict.[7] At the time, his theory did not receive much attention, as the focus of Western academics was directed towards dealing with a different existential threat, the expansionism of the Soviet Union.[8]

At the time of Lewis's speech, the Cold War paradigm was the dominant one. In this context, a conflict between Islam

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and the West was taken as a secondary threat, framed through proxy conflicts involving communist-supported groups.[9] With the end of the Cold War, however, a new framework aimed at explaining and guiding US foreign policy was necessary. It was then that Lewis's clash *between* civilisations became Huntington's clash *of* civilisations.[10]

Samuel Phillips Huntington, a prominent US political scientist, furthered Lewis's theory and adapted it to what he claimed to be a new Post-Cold War world. Contrary to what had been in the previous decades, he affirmed, conflicts in this new world would not be based on ideology anymore, but solely on culture. In Huntington's words:

It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future.[11]

Huntington was not exclusively an academic, however, but also an advisor to the US government.[12] As such, his goal was that the "Clash of Civilizations" would not be a purely theoretical concept, but also a useful tool for policy-makers.[13] In the void left by the end of the Cold War, the US lacked a guiding paradigm that would enable it to maintain its hegemony and further its interests worldwide. Huntington aimed to fill that gap.

It is due to this aim that Huntington makes it a point to highlight that his interpretation of world affairs was not grounded in social science but was, instead, purely a framework or a paradigm.[14] This distinction is important because, as Thomas Kuhn exposed in 1962,[15] a paradigm does not need to stand up to social scientific scrutiny. What it does need, however, is to be extensively believed. Thus, a paradigm could be built on widely inaccurate assumptions, but as long as enough people accept its claims as true, it was fulfilling its purpose.

With a goal of Western policy relevance in mind, Huntington goes on to specify the tenets of his framework. He defines a civilization as "the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species."[16] He then goes on to number "seven or eight major civilizations,"[17] which are the Western, the Confucian, the Japanese, the Islamic, the Hindu, the Slavic-Orthodox, the Latin American and, "possibly", the African. The points where those civilizations meet, labelled by Huntington as "fault lines",[18] would be, at the micro-level, points of struggle and violence. At the macro-level, states of different civilisations would compete for power, influence, and cultural and religious hegemony.[19]

One specific inter-civilizational conflict, however, was highlighted by Huntington as having special significance: that of the Western and the Islamic civilisations. He affirms that the "conflict along the fault line between Western and Islamic civilizations has been going on for 1,300 years,"[20] and that "the underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, and "[t]he problem for Islam is not the CIA or the US Department of Defense. It is the West."[21]

With this assertion, Huntington frames the conflict between the "West" and "Islam" as both historical, unchangeable and essentialist. It is this view that will implicitly guide US foreign policy regarding the Middle East for subsequent years, and will also influence media depictions, public opinion and political discourse[22] all over the world.

As stated above, the goal of this article is to analyse the impacts and pervasiveness of the Clash of Civilizations framework in today's world, regardless of its scientific inaccuracy. However, in order to contextualise the debate around the theory and expose the issues that can come about by relying on it, I will now highlight some of the main criticisms directed at Huntington over the past 25 years.

Ever since Huntington came forward with his framework, the concepts of inter-civilizational clash and dialogue became mainstream concerns in both international and domestic spheres.[23] However, academic scrutiny has highlighted a plethora of issues with the theory, which is so riddled with reductionism, over-generalisation and bias that its scholarship value is severely undermined.

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Some prominent points of contention regarding Huntington's framework, as compiled in 2018 by Algeriani and Mohadi from an extensive body of work,[24] are: 1. The Clash of Civilization paradigm is simplistic and reductionist, as it condenses complex dynamics of conflict involving economic, social-political, geopolitical, etc., issues into necessarily a cultural clash; 2. Huntington's approach to history is selective and anecdotal; 3. Huntington's take on civilisations is monolithic, overlooking diversity and conflict within the blocs. For example, the fragmentation of the "Islamic Civilization" between Sunni and Shia is ignored;[25] 4. The paradigm is a classic example of 'othering'; 5. Huntington's position as an advisor for the US government takes away from the credibility of his argument and the quality of his scholarship; 6. Ultimately, the theory fails by ignoring the commonalities shared by civilisations, and its interactions, overlaps, merges and general evolution.

As briefly exemplified above, the Clash of Civilizations framework does not stand to scientific scrutiny and its many oversights undermine its explanatory power. All of these flaws, however, do not take away from the policy relevance that the theory achieved, nor from its pervasiveness in mainstream thought. In the next section, I will analyse Huntington's framework alongside International Relations' Constructivism paradigm with the goal of understanding how those two, mixed with Orientalist and Occidentalist worldviews, shape and explain contemporary politics.

A self-fulfilled prophecy?

Along with the end of the Cold War, another new paradigm came in vogue in International Relations: Constructivism. Constructivism sees the world as socially constructed,[26] with agency and structure mutually constituting each other.[27] Agency is here understood as the ability of someone to act, whereas structure refers to the international system.[28] The core tenant of the theory is that ideas and beliefs shape actions, and thus the world, as much as the so-called "material reality." Additionally, when those beliefs and ideas held by the actors change, so does the social relationship between them.[29] In this sense, the identities of the states are also multiple, socially constituted and dependent on ideas the actors hold about themselves and one another.[30]

Accordingly, the political scientist Benedict Anderson defined nations as collective bodies that emerge when people imagine them.[31] Similarly, by allowing people to imagine intrinsically antagonistic civilizations that would inevitably crash, it is then possible to understand how those clashing civilisations would indeed materialise. Thus, taking the Constructivist paradigm as a basis of analysis, one can examine how the Clash of Civilizations framework, albeit widely inaccurate as briefly demonstrated in the previous section, is still influential and shapes actor's beliefs and actions.

During the Cold War, the predominant view held by the actors was that the world was divided ideologically between Capitalism and Socialism, and that all other major conflicts stemmed from that. Thus, conflicts between the West and the Middle East were perceived as embedded into that ideological structure.[32] With the end of the Cold War, however, a new, unified enemy was necessary in the context of the "West vs. the rest"[33] ideology that shaped U.S foreign policy. Conveniently, Huntington presented the "Islamic Civilization" for the role, which was accepted by policymakers and public opinion. As Algeriani and Mohadi put it, "if policymakers come to the conclusion that Islam is the next threat to the West, then that is what these policymakers are likely to see."[34]

The aforementioned definition of paradigm by Thomas Kuhn ties nicely into this constructivist view. He stated that paradigms do not need to be scientifically accurate, but believable. Hence, it did not matter for Huntington that his theory would not hold up to scientific scrutiny. What mattered was that it was actionable. And actionable it was, as the aftermath of September 11 would come to prove.

Jeffrey Haynes argues that, without 9/11, the Clash of Civilizations theory would not have become a mainstream lens through which to explain the "sometimes-fraught relationship between the West and Muslim countries."[35] The attacks, which were carried out by only 19 Muslim terrorists, were enough for some to regard all Muslims as guilty and,[36] in consequence, sediment Huntington's theory of an irreconcilable conflict between the West and Islam in general. As a matter of fact, Algeriani and Mohadi stated that "such notions as the Clash of Civilizations theory have diverted attention from the real causes of terrorism and have so been instrumental in shaping the American perception of and foreign policy on Islamic fundamentalism."[37]

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Albeit most often implicitly, the concept of a civilizational clash has since then been prominent in public discourses by politicians and the media[38] not only in the United States but all over the world. The National Rally party in France, the Alternative for Germany party in Germany, the Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident movement[39] and even al Qaeda are good examples of international actors that base their ideology around Huntingtonian values.[40] Those actors, among many others, make efforts to shape communal identities through an "us vs. them" dispute that brings about Orientalist and Occidentalist worldviews.

Orientalism, as defined by Edward Said, "is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'The Occident'".[41] This distinction, however, is made based on the West's experience and imagination of what the Orient is,[42] and involves seeing the Arab culture as intrinsically foreign, backward, uncivilized, inferior and, at times, dangerous.[43]

Occidentalism, on the other hand, is the counterpart phenomenon as directed from "the Orient" to the "West". Occidentalism is a "dehumanizing picture of the West"[44] that portrays it as a machine-like society with no culture nor soul.[45] Buruma and Margalit trace its strands throughout history and highlight the images of Westerners as "rootless, arrogant, greedy, decadent, frivolous cosmopolitan, […] the antithesis of the self-sacrificing hero; and […] the infidel, who must be crushed to make way for a world of pure faith."[46] It is important to highlight, however, that even though both Orientalism and Occidentalism derive from prejudice and exacerbate polarization, they do not do so to the same extent. Occidentalism holds no structural power in the international system, whereas Orientalism is the ideology of the hegemonic Western block and informs the state's wars and policies.

Both worldviews – Orientalism and Occidentalism – have existed long before Huntington or even Lewis published their assessments of an impending civilizational clash. However, their concept provided not only a theoretical justification to the former, but also served as a convenient explanation for 9/11 that legitimised othering and violent relations between the "West" and the Middle East.

In the next section, I will analyse how Huntington's framework resurfaced as an explanatory and guiding principle in the post-9/11 world and what consequences this re-emergence had in how international actors imagined themselves and the other. With that aim, I will perform a case study on the public discourses of the United States and the Islamic State. I chose those two actors due to their reliance in both Orientalist and Occidentalist discourses, and also due to their protagonism in a conflict that is taken as the most recent expression of the "Clash of Civilizations."

Civilizational politics on the rise

In the aftermath of 9/11, it seemed that, if not proven, Huntington's theory had been at least remarkably prescient.[47] Many in the West believed that the attacks evidenced that Islam was steeped in violence and conflict, and that its borders, as affirmed by Huntington[48], were indeed bloody.[49]

The U.S government responded to the attacks by declaring a "War on Terror" and invading Afghanistan and Iraq, but neither President George W. Bush, nor his successor, Barack Obama, publicly identified the conflicts as a civilizational clash.[50] Nevertheless, some politicians, policymakers and part of the media were clearly influenced by Huntington's framework, especially when regarding hostility, competition and conflict between the West and the Middle East.[51] In this context, Islamophobia, which already existed in the West to a certain extent, was stimulated[52] and explored by right-wing populists who used anti-Muslim rhetoric as an electoral tactic.[53] Both in the United States and Europe alike, highlighting supposed key civilizational differences became mainstream in politics.

Figures such as Steve Bannon in the USA lionize the virtues and values of Christian individualism and "Judeo Christian values" (Haynes 2017) while in Europe, it is—increasingly secular— "European values" which are said to separate indigenous people from Muslim immigrants. Successful right-wing populists, such as Hungary's Viktor Orbán put themselves forward as defenders of Europe's "Christian" civilization and claim to authorize anti-migrant policies in order to protect Europe from being "overrun" by Muslim "hordes". […] There is also a second dimension to the arguments of figures like Orbán, which are taken up by far-right figures such as Gert Wilders in The Netherlands

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and Marine Le Pen in France. They claim that Europe's Muslim immigrants pose a clear and persistent threat to "European" traditions of tolerance, freedom and democracy.[54]

Donald Trump's election in the United States is tangible proof of the public acceptance of such beliefs, as his campaign was grounded on the fundamental opposition between the West and the East. In 2015 alone, the then-candidate to the US presidency announced his plans to implement a database to track Muslims,[55] called for surveillance of Muslim communities and the closing of mosques,[56] implied that Syrian refugees in the US could be members of ISIS,[57] and even claimed having watched "thousands and thousands" of Muslims cheering on 9/11. In 2016, Trump went further and defined that there was a "Muslim problem" due to "tremendous hatred",[58] claimed that Syrian refugees were radicalising American children and recruiting them for ISIS,[59] and declared that "Islam hates us."[60] He would also call for a ban on Muslims entering the U.S as "we can't allow people coming into this country who have this hatred of the United States."

Once elected, Trump filled his administration with figures that saw Islam as an "enemy ideology," and who helped to translate the paradigm of a Clash of Civilizations with Islam into a national strategy.[61] Some of the controversial figures that took part of the United States government and that exemplify its turn towards Huntington's paradigm are Steve Bannon as chief strategist, a known Islamophobe that scripted a film about a civilizational clash that victimised the US;[62] Michael Flynn as national security adviser, who has called Islam a vicious cancer;[63] and known anti-Muslim campaigner Katharine Gorka in homeland security.[64]

The examples above demonstrate how Islamophobia, xenophobia and an Orientalist view of Islam was both encouraged and co-opted for political gains during Trump's campaign. Underlying all those values there was a firm belief in the superiority of the West and its irrefutable clash with an inferior – and dangerous – civilization. This danger stemmed from a lack of shared values, which were clearly hierarchised in favour of the West, and from an inexplicable hatred arising from the so-called enemy. In Trump's relation with the Middle East, there is no consideration to any other potential cause of conflict that is not cultural, which is in itself a clear nod towards Huntington's paradigm. Hence, his election highlights the pervasiveness of this sort of belief among the American population and is also a clear example of how shared beliefs guide policies and actions that, once implemented, bring about an actual clash.

On the other side of this imagined clash, Islamic State jihadists celebrated Trump's victory as a propaganda tool for their cause.[65] Trump's Islamophobic rhetoric and policies, such as the Muslim ban, played perfectly into IS's depiction of the West as an enemy civilization.[66] Their strategy was the same as the Western right-wing populists: to use othering rhetoric to sediment an identity in opposition to an imagined enemy, and to further political goals.[67] In order to do that, IS spread Occidentalist propaganda that supported and fulfilled "through language and images the Huntingtonian prophecy of clashing civilizations."[68]

By entering the civilizational repertoire and labelling the West as an unworthy enemy, the group both reifies and homogenises its identity and constructs a dichotomous moral worldview, where the in-group is good and right, and the out-group is bad and wrong.[69] The specificity of the Islamic State's civilizational discourse, however, is that it is also a direct call to action.[70]

Baele et al. did an impressive quantitative and qualitative analysis of Huntingtonian undertones in 25 editions of IS propaganda magazines published from 2014 to 2017. Their main finding was that the West is unambiguously identified as a major civilizational enemy, characterised fundamentally by being sinful, uncivilized and taken by material and animalistic values.[71] This enemy civilization is portrayed as a fundamental threat to Islam due to three major factors: its aforementioned sinful essence that corrupts anyone that comes in contact with it,[72] the overt violent Western aggression toward Muslims, and Western antagonism in a large-scale, covert plot against Islam.[73]

Regarding Western aggression, the media repeatedly mentions the torture and killing of Muslims, and the invasion of Arab lands, calling every Muslim to take revenge as a matter of personal obligation.[74] Concerning the plot against Islam, Western leaders are accused of manipulating, subverting and controlling apostate governments across the Middle East, which are referred to as being puppets of their "Western masters." These masters are then blamed for

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being responsible for maintaining the region in a state of poverty and submission.[75] On a religious dimension, the West is also blamed for conducting a secret plot aimed at corrupting Islam in order to manipulate Muslims into being docile to the West even in face of its direct aggression.[76] These conspiracy theories are used to erode trust in legitimate authorities and also to fuel polarization in the face of the enemy civilization[77]. For the faithful Muslim, there are only two solutions: either join the IS in its territory or attack the West from within.[78]

A 2019 study by Baele et al is also fundamental in bringing to light that the group's framing of the West as a civilizational enemy is not only due to its aggression but also due to its essence.

What's important to understand here is that although some might argue that your foreign policies are the extent of what drives our hatred, this particular reason for hating you is secondary. […] The fact is, even if you were to stop bombing us, imprisoning us, torturing us, vilifying us, and usurping our lands, we would continue to hate you because our primary reason for hating you will not cease to exist until you embrace Islam.[79]

In this sense, the Islamic State endorses and reproduces Huntington's view of a clash of civilizations driven primarily by cultural differences[80] that are both irreconcilable and essentialist. This discourse is used mainly to further political aims, radicalise its audiences and, additionally, encourage violence against the imagined enemy.[81]

Both cases studied above, that of the United States' Trump administration and that of the Islamic State propaganda, highlight how the notion of impending civilizational clashes structure contemporary world politics discussions and action.[82] The pervasiveness of Huntington's discourse in the beliefs and policies guiding the most powerful state in the world, on one hand, and the use of Clash of Civilizations paradigm by the most lethal and successful terrorist organisation in recent years[83], on the other, signal the continued relevance of Huntington's framework and shed light on how it ultimately became a self-fulfilled prophecy.

Conclusion

The "Clash of Civilizations" paradigm is a simplistic, reductionist and othering theory from an academic point of view, but its rhetorical exploitation by leaders both of right-wing political parties, and extremist Islamist groups exacerbate the polarisation[84] and materialise an actual clash between imagined civilisations.

The examples of the United States and the Islamic State discussed above are only some of the most prominent ones, but this belief in an inevitable clash of civilisations is all-pervasive in contemporary extremist politics and is evident in a multitude of other institutions, such as the National Rally party in France, the Alternative for Germany party and the Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident movement, for example.[85] As those actors, and many others, propagate their Huntingtonian beliefs, they shape policies and actions that make an actual clash come true, transforming Huntington's theory into a self-fulfilled prophecy. However, due to its hegemonic position as a guiding ideology to the West, Orientalism's impact is more pervasive than Occidentalism, even though both exacerbate polarization and hatred.

Analytical exercises such as the ones undertaken in this article are important because they demonstrate how the idea of a civilizational clash is used to divert attention from real issues, such as the true causes of terrorism, for example; to manipulate the population in order to obtain a specific political outcome; and to counter-productively exacerbate polarization and conflicts[86]. Therefore, Huntington's thesis is not only academically limited but also empirically dangerous.[87]

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