

**CRITICAL REVIEW:
THE CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS?
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CRITICAL ANALYSIS: THE CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS?

This critical review examines Samuel P. Huntington's 1993 article titled "*The Clash of Civilizations?*". In this article, Huntington (1993a) argues that in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall, international relations would no longer be dominated by an ideological conflict as was witnessed during the Cold War years, between capitalism and communism. Nor would the next pattern of conflict be dominated by state-to-state tensions. Instead, as Huntington argues, the world would witness a clash of civilizations between a Western civilization and other major civilizations – in particular an Islamic civilization and a Confucian civilization. Huntington makes valid arguments in terms of what international relations would *not* be dominated by, however; the argument that a clash of civilizations based on cultural differences between the West and other civilizations is a simplistic hypothesis born out of a realist Cold War paradigm.

Huntington begins by claiming that although certain cultural differences occur between varying communities within a state, and likewise between states within a civilization, common bonds within that civilization ultimately lead to civilizations being completely distinct from others. As Huntington uses as an example, two villages in Italy may be different culturally, however, these two villages will still maintain an overall Italian culture. This Italian culture is different from German culture, for example, but they both are part of a larger European culture, which is part of Western civilization's culture. Western civilization, as Huntington argues, shares no commonality in cultural values with other civilizations such as the Islamic and Confucian civilizations. Since Western civilization is largely based on the principles of democracy and human rights while other civilizations are not; Huntington argues that this creates a divide between the "West and the rest". Therefore, Huntington argues that the West and other civilizations will ultimately clash as they do not share a broader cultural identity, short of the human race.

Although Huntington makes a strong and valid argument that culture is a main source of conflict, the claim that the broader civilization that one identifies with 'intensely' appears to be overgeneralized as Huntington's civilization groupings are fraught with their own internal cultural divisions and conflict. If current conflicts within these civilizations are examined, it is

quite evident that Huntington's elusion to unity among civilizations is invalid. Furthermore, Huntington's claim that loyalties to civilizations as a source of conflict versus national or ethnic identities is flawed. As Russet, Oneal, and Cox (2000) argue, this claim is doubtful, particularly in the Islamic civilization where interests within particular states have outweighed those of all-encompassing Islamic or pan-Arab convictions. Therefore, this would seem to invalidate Huntington's claim that one identifies with him or herself as a member of their Western, Islamic, or Confusion civilization first and foremost.

The world's most important conflicts, as Huntington argues, will occur along the fault lines that demarcate a civilization's boundary with another's. This has provoked some statistical analyses to be conducted to determine the validity of Huntington's claim that this has been the case. Russet et al. (2000) conducted one such analysis and reported that "there is little evidence that [civilizations] define the fault lines along which international conflict is apt to occur". Furthermore, Errol Henderson (1998) did a study reporting that although differences in religion increase the incidence of war, ethnic and linguistic similarity also increase the likelihood of conflict. This study also found that geographical proximity between states is also a stronger factor than culture. These reports are of interest as they demonstrate that cultural differences are not the prime source of conflict. In fact, it appears that in some cases, similarity between differing groups within the same civilization creates a more likely foundation for conflict. This brings into question Huntington's claim that conflicts between civilizations will be concentrated on the cultural fault lines dividing civilizations. It is also reasonable to argue that many of the conflicts Huntington identifies on these fault lines simply have a greater likelihood to conflict as they are neighboring states.

As Kunihiro Imai (2006) explains, these statistical results disprove one of Huntington's major hypotheses. However, since the research was based on data from past militarized disputes, the test may not have been appropriate for Huntington's thesis in a post-Cold War era. Therefore, whether conflict is found along the fault lines of civilizational boundaries or not does not necessarily disprove Huntington's thesis. However, this weakens the argument made that as civilizations grow increasingly grounded in their own cultures, values, and religions,

conflict will occur along the fault lines where civilizations are demarcated. Therefore, cultures may be attempting to further establish their own unique identities in defense from globalization; however, clashes will not necessarily occur along cultural or civilizational boundaries.

One of the reasons why Huntington (1993) argues that civilizations will clash is due to the continuing process of globalization. As argued, this process intensifies the awareness of differences between civilizations and similarities within a civilization. Globalization and intensifying global economic integration weakens a state's sense of identity resulting in many longstanding traditions in some cultures to become lost. Economic globalization, which pushes liberal democracy grounded in Western civilization, is also argued by Huntington to be a source of conflict as Confucian and Islamic states are culturally adverse to such political liberalization. Therefore, as previously mentioned, a civilization will continuously ground itself more staunchly, or return to its roots, within its own culture. As Huntington argues, this is a source of non-Western extreme fundamentalism to battle Western influence in particular. However, although a more firm grounding in one's culture may be occurring, Huntington's argument that Confucian and Islamic states are economically unique is debateable.

As Imai (2006) argues, Asian states, or Confucian civilization as described by Huntington, may be resilient toward liberal democracy. However, this difference is not born out of cultural differences or civilizational characteristics. As Imai describes, Confucianism stresses a superior-inferior relationship between "the ruler and the ruled" – the subordinate following and never questioning the orders of its superior. This appears in line with Huntington's argument that Confucianism gives no legitimacy for autonomous social institutions and so citizens must obey the commands of state authorities. Since Confucian values are evidently contradictory to free and open societies found in Western states, Huntington appears to be correct that such a culturally based framework would create a clash between these two opposing views. Furthermore, as Fareed Zakaria (1994) illustrates in one example, former Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew emphasized a need to develop an Asian style alternative to Western democracy because of the cultural differences previously discussed. However, as

Francis Fukuyama (1995) argues, such obstacles may not necessarily thwart democratization in Confucian states as a causal link between Confucianism and democratization has not been made. Fukuyama explains that Confucianism is in fact compatible with democracy because of Confucianism's strong emphasis on education – education being a strong foundation for democratic institutions – and Confucianism's history of tolerance and coexistence with other religions such as Christianity. However, Stephan Haggard (as cited in Imai, 2006) makes the argument that although economic globalization may fail to democratize Confucian states, it allows for a shift in the balance of power from state-centric domination to a more polycentric corporate domination. Thus, although Huntington provides reasonable arguments in favor of cultural clashes between Confucianism's fundamental basis and Western liberal democracy, there are a number of historical and economic factors that are at play which counter the notion that difference in culture or civilization is ultimately the source of conflict.

Likewise, this realist “us” versus “them” paradigm that Huntington advocates, is said to exist between the West and Islamic civilization. Although Huntington is correct in pointing out the numerous wars and conflicts that have occurred as a result of conflicted religious beliefs, as with the Confucian civilization Huntington argues that Islamic states cannot adopt liberal democracy. In Huntington's book *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (1993b), it is argued that because most Muslim states did not democratize during the so-called third wave of the 1980s, some cultures are strongly opposed to democracy. John Voll (2005) supports Huntington's claim that Islam and democracy are incompatible because of the Islamic values giving absolute sovereignty to God, Shari'a law cannot be altered by elected officials, and the idea of parliament is seen as blasphemous. Similar to the authoritarian vision in Confucian civilization, Islamic civilization too has an authoritarian vision based on Muslim scholars' teachings. However, as Shireen Hunter (as cited in Imai, 2006) demonstrates, “the actual experience of many countries...shows that culture is not an insurmountable barrier to democratization” and that “historical evidence does not support a culturally deterministic explanation for failure in either modernization or democratization in the Muslim world and elsewhere”. In further defiance of Huntington's (1993a) thesis, Imai (2006) describes the Muslim world as highly fractured on a cultural and religious level. Therefore,

Huntington makes a highly overgeneralized argument that the Muslim world is unified and that it has the general sentiment for a greater Islamic civilization. Furthermore, Huntington's arguments may be valid in terms of the compatibility of Islamic tradition and democracy; however, events following the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011 have largely proved that this is not the case as once autocratic states are now democratizing.

George Kennan (1947) accurately described the ideological future threat to the United States that the Soviet Union's communism represented to the United States' capitalism. As a cautionary warning to U.S. policymakers, Kennan urged the United States to put in place a "long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies" and that "threats or blustering or superfluous gestures of outward toughness" should be avoided. In reality, the Cold War saw a build-up of "outward toughness" at an exponential rate. Kennan's warning was misconstrued as the United States used Kennan's containment strategy to militarily expand in an attempt to stop the spread of communism. Likewise, Huntington's description of an Islamic and Confucian threat has been arguably misconstrued and utilized by the United States since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Following the attacks, the United States declared the War on Terror which gave validation to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. This has arguably allowed for Samuel Huntington's thesis, like Kennan's, to be misused as a shaper of events. Therefore, the "us" versus "them" template that Huntington suggests has potential to become a self-fulfilling prophecy if the proper measures are not put in place to diffuse the issue before it becomes one. In any case, Huntington's thesis could contribute to creating an issue that arguably does not exist.

Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations?* makes many reasonable arguments about what international relations would be dominated by following the Cold War. However, perhaps the Cold War template in which is used to describe future conflict between the West and other civilizations is too simplistic. As this analysis has demonstrated, conflict is most prevalent by relatively small groups often in geographical proximity with one another and often sharing many cultural similarities. This disproves Huntington's thesis that great civilizations based on culture will clash because of their fundamental values, and more specifically, non-

Western civilizations' inability to democratize. Furthermore, Huntington alludes to the idea that members of a civilization identify with their civilization more than their state or local community is an assumption that appears to be false as this argument underestimates more local powers. Huntington's assumption that civilizations are unified is another false assumption that has been proven incorrect by domestic Middle East conflicts and other protests in various other civilizations as being the hallmark sources of conflict. It is reasonable to conclude based on the simplistic nature of Huntington's thesis that the clash of civilizations is largely flawed as it does not take into account a variety of factors which confound the overall claim that international relations would be dominated by a cultural conflict of civilizations following the Cold War.

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