

Peddling civilization wars

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Culture Conflict

SAMUEL Huntington peddles a culturalist thesis about the sources of conflicts in "The Clash of Civilizations". He builds on the premise that the "most important distinctions among peoples are not ideological, political, or economic. They are cultural."

If cultural distinctions possess primacy, it follows that they will drive the world's conflicts. The clash asserts that the cold war, characterized by the clash of ideologies, was an aberration: the most dangerous conflicts in the new post-cold war era will occur along the fault-lines of civilizations. Although Huntington identifies nine contemporary civilizations, there are three that monopolize his attention: the West, Islam and the Sinic civilization. The critical conflicts in the coming decades will occur because of challenges to the West from Islam and China.

This is social science at its political best — as ideology. The Clash obfuscates the realities of unequal power: in this case, the deepest, most enduring, and

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countries — including the largest — are among the world's poorest; and China too, despite two decades of rapid growth, remains quite poor. In addition, the Islamic world lacks any political unity: it is fragmented into more than fifty countries.

It is not clear that conflicts between rich and poor countries can only occur if the latter are united. Two poor countries, China and India, have populations that exceed the combined

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Curiously, there is no room in Huntington's taxonomy for Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, or Tibet. They are looking for a home.

At the same time, there exists a strong correspondence between Huntington's civilizations and Western notion of races. All but one of them can be identified with a 'race': the West with Germanic, the Orthodox with Slavic, Latin American with Mestizo (though their elites are

the term is understood in the West.

The concept of civilization creates ambiguity because of its empirical relationship with states. Of the six major civilizations — the Western, Orthodox, Islamic, Indian, Sinic, and Japanese — the last three are identical or nearly identical with a state. India, China and Japan are civilizations and states. In addition, two core states — United States and Russia — contain a third and a half of the total populations of their civilizations. In the event, it becomes easy to construe a straight conflict over interests — say between United States and China, or China and Russia — as a clash of civilizations.

There are at least two answers Huntington offers to this question: these clashes have roots in the human psyche and in the nature of cultures.

At the deepest level, the clash of civilizations is rooted in our psyche. People define themselves by identifying with "cultural groups: tribes, ethnic

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deepest, most enduring, and widening divisions between rich and poor countries. It is carelessly constructed, ahistorical and contradictory; it is also contradicted by historical evidence. Nevertheless, Huntington's thesis has dominated public discourse since it was first launched in 1993. Apparently, ideologies succeed by appealing to interests, not logic or evidence.

In the post-cold war world, Huntington confidently proclaims, "the most pervasive, important, and dangerous conflicts will not be between social classes, rich and poor, or other economically defined groups, but between peoples belonging to different cultural entities."

Huntington claims that conflicts between rich and poor countries are unlikely because the latter "lack the political unity, economic power, and military capability to challenge the rich countries." Ironically, this contradicts his own thesis about the most serious challenges to the West emanating from Islam and China. Many of the Islamic

population of all western countries. China is already regarded as a military threat to the United States, though India may not be far behind. Given their enormous size, with another decade or two of rapid growth, these two countries could also begin to offer serious economic competition to the Core countries.

Even smaller countries can become a threat. It has been America's policy to ostracize countries in the Periphery as rogue states if they do one or more of three things: they resist US hegemony, they possess or are developing long-range missiles, and they possess or are developing weapons of mass destruction. Nearly all the "rogue states" are quite small; the list includes Iran, Iraq, North Korea, Syria, Cuba and Libya. It would appear that the United States takes the "rogue states" quite seriously. It is developing the Nuclear Defense Shield to intercept and shoot down missiles fired by the rogue states.

Amusingly, Huntington negates his own thesis — that

izational" conflicts?

An examination of the central concept in "The Clash of Civilizations" reveals several more flaws and contradictions in Huntington's thesis.

Huntington defines 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." In addition, each civilization is defined by its core and enduring "values, norms, institutions, and modes of thinking."

This is followed by a list of eight contemporary civilizations: Sinic, Japanese, Hindu, Islamic, Orthodox, Latin American, the West, and African (possibly). This list might have been convincing if Huntington had identified their core "values, norms, institutions, and modes of thinking." But he refuses to oblige. We are left wondering if indeed these 'civilizations' can be defined by some set of unchanging core values; or how great are the differences in the core values of these civilizations.

almost entirely white), the Sinic and Japanese with the 'yellow race', the Hindu with the dark Caucasians, and the African with black. Islam alone does not fit this description. This leads to a suspicion. Is it possible that Huntington's scheme simply recycles the western division of mankind into races?

Although Huntington claims that religion is "a central defining characteristic" of civilizations, the correlation between his civilizations and religion is quite weak. The West, Orthodox and Latin American civilizations are all Christian. Latin America is set apart because it is mostly Catholic; but so are Spain, Portugal, Belgium, France and Italy. More importantly, if there can be three Christian civilizations, what prevents Huntington from splitting Islam along sectarian (Shiite and Sunni) or racial lines (Arab, Iranian, Turkic, African and Malay). Finally, there are two civilizations on Huntington's list — the Sinic and Japanese — which have no clear religious affiliations, at least, as

cultural groups, tribes, ethnic groups, religious communities, nations, and, at the broadest level, civilizations." But this is not enough: in order to deepen our identity we must also hate others. In other words, the clash of civilizations is rooted in natural human frailties.

This two-part thesis is problematic in both its parts. The psychic need for identity is better fulfilled by identifying with smaller groups — one's family, village, tribe, trade union, club, or team — rather than with larger, secondary, more distant groups, such as nations and civilizations. If we do identity with a nation or civilization, this is socially constructed, not rooted in our psyche. Similarly, if our self-definition does feed on hatred, we might derive considerably greater satisfaction in directing this hatred towards rivals at hand — in business, politics, sports, or at the workplace — rather than to abstract and distant entities such as 'other' civilizations. ■
(Next week: Why Huntington is wrong)