

Why Huntington is wrong

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In the context of the West and Islam, Samuel Huntington asserts that their conflicts "flow from the nature of the two religions and the civilizations based on them." Thus, the "ongoing pattern of conflict" between the two civilizations results, among other things, from conflicts over the role of religion in politics.

Even their similarities become sources of conflicts: their monotheism, which will not accommodate other gods; their universalistic claims that contest the same territory; and the competition of their missionaries.

These claims are rife with problems. Ironically, an Islamic civilization barely existed during the first phase of Arab expansion — leading to collisions with the Byzantine Empire and the Latin West — in the seventh and early eighth centuries. Second, let alone forcing Islam upon their subjects, the first Islamic empire — that of the Omayyads — discouraged conversions to Islam. They preferred the revenues from jizya, a head tax imposed on non-Muslims.

The opposition between the West and Islam over secularism is false. For most of its history, the West defined itself as Christendom, which granted citizenship only to true believers in Catholic dogma. Christians who departed from the true faith, as well as Jews and Muslims, were persecuted, massacred, or expelled from Europe. After a period of murderous wars, following the rise of Protestantism, the West extended religious tolerance to Christian denominations.

However, with some exceptions, this tolerance was not extended to non-Christians until quite recently. On the other hand, the tolerance which Islamic empires granted to diverse religious tendencies within Islam, and, to a lesser degree, to other religions, would be embraced by the West only in recent times.

The separation between the Church and State in the West

index of power capabilities. Once again, there is no comfort for the clash of civilizations. Cultural differences had no visible impact on the probability of wars during this period.

The Huntington thesis finds no support in the period before 1945. Of 18 major wars fought by great powers between 1600 and 1945, only six involved states from two or more civilizations. Once again, when Henderson and Tucker examined international wars between 1816 and 1945, with controls for other influences, they found that the probability of conflicts between two states was greater if they belonged to the same civilization. Quite the opposite of what Huntington predicts.

Now consider the accusations about Islam's "bloody borders." Huntington asserts that "in the 1990s they [Muslims] have been far more involved in intergroup violence than the people of any other civilization." Again, the data tell a different story. In his survey of ethnic conflicts, Jonathan Fox found that Islam was involved in 23.2 percent of all inter-civilizational conflicts between 1945 and 1989, and 24.7 percent of these conflicts between 1990 and 1998. These shares are not too far above Islam's share in world population; nor do we observe any dramatic rise in this share since the end of the Cold War.

The post-cold war period marked a new intensification in the reach of global capitalism. This deepened the demand for ideologies that would obfuscate the growing divisions between, as well as inside, the rich and poor countries. Huntington's thesis answers this demand by deflecting attention from the battles

is also exaggerated. The Catholic Church was itself a major power centre, often rivalling the princes. In any case, this separation would be hard to enforce, since the leaders of the Church and the state were drawn from the same class of elite landowners. This only grew worse with the rise of Protestantism. Often, this meant that the head of state became the head of the national church: Queen Elizabeth is still the head of the Anglican Church.

On the other hand, the Islamic societies had several secular features, some not present in medieval or modern Europe. At least Sunni Islam has never been organized into a Church: it has remained a decentralized religion, in which each local community organizes its own schools and places of worship. The elaboration of legal systems — not just family laws — was never a monopoly of the state. Instead, this was vested in outstanding jurists.

On the other hand, Islamic societies have moved in the opposite direction over the past century, away from the tolerance of their religion. The Islamic movements that have emerged to resist the marginalization of Islamic societies are more rigid in matters of practice, more defensive, and less tolerant of other religions than almost any of the traditional schools of Islam.

It will scarcely surprise anyone that a theory so weakly constructed as Huntington's should fail the empirical test: and it fails resoundingly. First, consider his main thesis which claims that conflicts between two states after 1989 are more likely if they belong to two different civilizations. This is not supported by the evidence. A recent study by Jonathan Fox shows that a comparison of all ethnic conflicts during the cold war, and the period since, shows a modest decline in the ratio of inter-civilization conflicts to intra-civilization conflicts. We hear no deafening tumult of civilizational clashes after 1989.

Alternatively, we might analyze the historical evidence to check if the probability of conflicts rises with cultural differences. Henderson and Tucker have studied the impact of cultural differences on the probability of international conflicts during the post-cold war period; their study controls for distance between the countries, the presence of democracy, and an

over the world's economic divide

Why has The Clash dominated public discourse in the West despite its flawed theory, lack of empirical support, and its espousal of hatred as the necessary foundation of cultural identity?

Our capacity to believe narratives, even quite ridiculous ones, depends on how well they serve our individual and collective interests. Many of the stories social scientists weave about race, culture, economic development, free markets and free trade are implausible, even farcical, once they are seen in their true colours. But they endure so long as they serve powerful interests. They endure because these powerful interests can employ a legion of scholars who willingly — though often unknowingly — trade the prestige of their scholarship for good jobs, good pay, and the accolades of bosses.

The post-cold war period marked a new intensification in the reach of global capitalism. The communist challenge had forced the Core countries to unite, to forge multilateral institutions to manage their global interests: when the cold war ended, the Core countries moved decisively, with the multilateral institutions in the lead, to create a global economic regime which allowed Core capital to freely penetrate every segment of the Periphery. The bywords of this new regime are: free trade, liberal exchange markets, privatization, national treatment of foreign capital, and globalization of intellectual property rights.

This has produced rapid immiseration of large parts of the Periphery, the erosion of indigenous capital in much of the Periphery, and widening disparities between the Core and the Periphery. Not surprisingly, this more transparent, overbearing and invasive imperialism deepened the demand for ideologies that would obfuscate the growing divisions between, as well as inside, the rich and poor countries. The Clash answers to this demand by giving primacy to religious, racial and civilizational conflicts — thus deflecting attention from the looming battles over the world's economic divide. ■

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