

# Against Western cultural essentialism

EVER SINCE THE AMERICAN ACADEMIC, Samuel Huntington, published his highly controversial thesis regarding the Clash of Civilisations that warned of an inevitable confrontation between the West and the East, few have had reason to look ahead with optimism. What made matters even worse was the fact that such a simplistic thesis had such a wide audience in the world at large. Hundreds, if not thousands of prominent intellectuals, strategists and politicians considered the doom-laden prognosis of Huntington with care. Others, believing that the prophesy of the Cold War intellectual might one day come true, began the task of preparing for the inevitable.

It is therefore refreshing to come across those who are more than happy to take on the Huntingtonian thesis head on and to expose the fallacies that lie at its roots. One of them is Professor Dieter Senghaas, political scientist and peace studies expert from the University of Bremen, Germany. Over the years Prof Senghaas has worked and taught in a number of fields related to international relations as well as conflict resolution. Recently he began to look into civilisational development and inter-civilisation dialogue.

According to Prof Senghaas: "One of the biggest obstacles that stands in the way of dialogue between East and West today is the belief that cultures and civilisations are somehow self-generated and autonomous entities". He points out: "When Huntington proposed his thesis of the clash of civilisations, this was precisely the logic upon which his whole argument was based. But the premise is false, and it shows that he does not have a theory at all of how civilisations develop".

For Prof Senghaas, the reality is that civilisations are complex assemblies that come together

## VIEW

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amidst a string of variable factors that cannot be controlled or anticipated. "It would be a mistake to think that Europe and the Western world developed the way they did because of some inherent 'essen-

tial' genius. The Western notion of human rights, for instance, is not essentially Western in any way. The development of human rights in the West was the result of a long drawn out process of competition between rival groups and interests. It was never pre-determined. Those who claim that our values are unique to us in the West and that they were produced by some essential factors imbedded in our social and historical character are wrong."

The recognition of the contingent and circumscribed nature of Western civilisational and cultural development is of crucial importance for the West today, argues Prof Senghaas, for the simple reason that it may encourage Westerners to be more relativistic in their approach towards other cultures and societies. "Too often Westerners condemn and judge other societies without looking at themselves. They fail to ask the most obvious of questions: Are these societies really different from ours? What is really happening in these communities? Are they trying to grapple with the same problems that we have had to face ourselves? If they do this, Westerners may realise that these foreign communities are not as foreign and alien as they seem at first. This cultural-blindness has become a major problem for us in the process of international and inter-cultural dialogue. It is no wonder that the Western states are less able than ever to understand global developments around them."

The challenge posed by thinkers like Dieter Senghaas are evident. By forcing societies in the West as well as the East to recognise the complex and undetermined trajectories of their development in the past, he forces them to reconsider their own identities in the present. His sustained criticism of the essentialist premises upon which

most forms of ethno-nationalist politics is based comes as a timely intervention when race, religion and ethnicity are returning to the fore as major factors in shaping both national and international politics all over the world.

The states and communities that continue to harbour such notions of cultural specificity and uniqueness will find it increasingly difficult to cope with the demands of a pluralistic and globalised world. He argues: "Singapore is a good example. Its leaders tried to carve an image of the country as being somehow unique and different from the rest. In the end they failed. They could not stop the process of globalisation and they could not erase the fact that the needs of the global system were stronger. Developing countries in Asia have had to learn this the hard way, but at least many of them have begun to make the transition."

About the future of Europe, too, Prof Senghaas is more realistic: "The West cannot hope to continue as it has in the past. It must come to terms with its own difficult history, its links to the outside world and the fact that the rest of the world has also contributed to its development. This happened when the Arabs introduced Greek and Roman thought to the Europeans, for instance." Today, the West must come to terms with its role and place in a global world order where it can no longer claim that it is the sole representative civilisation and model. Failure to do so will amount to the denial of history itself, and it will go against the legacy of 'unintentional civilisation' that the West has inherited from its past.

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