

THE MYTH OF THE CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS IN DIALOGICAL-HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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Keywords: clash of civilizations, dialogue of civilizations, Eurocentrism/Orientalism, postcolonialism/non-Eurocentrism, globalization/global economy, rise of the West.

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Summary

This essay provides an overview of how a new non-Eurocentric dialogical approach has begun to emerge in the last decade to counter Eurocentric world history and the related discourse of the clash of civilizations. Such an approach is of interest not only to historical sociology and world history, but is one that can be utilized within Politics and International Relations to reflect anew on one of the most important idioms of world politics in the 21st century.

1. Introduction

One of the dominant narratives in international thought today is that of Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis. Though largely assumed to apply only to the post-1989 era, it is a thesis that Huntington uses to characterize the bulk of world history (with the Cold War era providing the exception). Although his thesis spawned a cottage industry of critiques within International Relations (IR), it has also constituted a target, implicitly or explicitly, in the development of non-Eurocentric world history/historical sociology; a development which has gone largely un-noticed by IR scholars. This relatively new body of work, which focuses on the development of civilizations in world-historical context, provides an important critique of Huntington's

thesis in a number of ways. In general it critiques Huntington's thesis for its:

- Eurocentrism/Orientalism;
- Ahistorical "substantialist" definition of civilizations, replacing it with a "relationalism" that focuses on the constitutive interactions between civilizations;
- Assumption that civilizations interact only at their edges (ie., *inter-civilizational* relations), thereby obscuring mutually constitutive *trans-civilizational* relations;
- Assumption that *independent* civilizations meet only in head-on conflict, focussing instead on the co-constitutive and often harmonious interactions between *interdependent* civilizations.

The upshot of the various non-Eurocentric accounts is to develop what Andre Gunder Frank calls a "humanocentric" or global ethical stance that firmly rejects the politics of civilizational difference, thereby pointing up the potential harmony of civilizations.

This essay provides a summary of the different variants of non-Eurocentrism as they each contribute to this alternative body of thinking. These comprise in chronological order:

- Global structuralism
- Global contingency
- Global dialogism

2. The Challenge to Eurocentrism and the Discourse of the Clash of Civilizations

2.1 The Historical Context

Samuel Huntington's famous thesis regarding the "clash of civilizations" (1993) has often been read by IR scholars as a diagnosis of the post-1989 international situation. This is differentiated from the Cold War period, 1947-1989, when "ideological conflicts" within the West (between the United States and the Soviet Union of course) dominated world politics. But for Huntington, the so-called "civilizational turn" following the end of the Cold War, was in fact a *return* to the normal inter-civilizational foundations of international relations. In this way, the Cold War period of intra-Western *ideological* difference marked the exception to the *historical norm* of inter-civilizational conflict between East and West (Huntington 1993: 25; see also Henderson and Tucker 2001: 322). Huntington's thesis is well-known for outlining eight key civilizations; something which he does in order to avoid the potential charge that an East/West dualistic definition of civilizations would be too simplistic, reductionist and essentialist. But as we shall see in the next sub-section, this turns out to be a clever sleight of hand given that the East-West division forms a key aspect of Huntington's approach. Borrowing the conceptual language from one IR scholar, it is clear that Huntington adopts a "substantialist" approach to civilizations; one that defines civilizations in terms of an essentialist cultural core that changes very little over time (Jackson 1996). Thus he assumes that civilizations are concatenations of primordial cultural/religious values which, by definition, do not exhibit large changes over time.

Crucial to this substantialist approach is the notion that civilizations are autonomous, self-constituting entities that are rigidly differentiated from each other and develop endogenously, free of interactions between each other. They have hard tectonic-like edges where they meet in head-on conflict. Their unique cultures ensure that the meeting place of civilizations is conflictual and bloody. And because of all this, Huntington's framework is one that has relevance for world history, reaching back at least to the time of the Crusades, when the clash between Christendom and the Islamic Middle East first began. From there, one can trace forwards, through the era of the European Age of Discovery, which allegedly brought Europe into conflict with the Far West (in the Americas) and of course, the East through the subsequent phases of Western formal and informal imperialism (initially India but later on Australia, Japan, China, the Middle East, Africa and East Asia more generally). Curiously, this norm of civilizational clashes between East and West is in effect air-brushed out during the Cold War though, as noted above, this constituted the temporal exception to the historical norm, as the clash returned with a vengeance after 1989 and, especially, after 9/11, 2001. However, especially within IR a number of scholars have argued that Huntington's approach is problematic, not least because it obscures the various "dialogues of civilizations" (e.g., Melleuish 2000; Jones 2002); something which underpins the dialogical/non-Eurocentric turn in world history/historical sociology which is, of course, the subject matter of this entry. Before I turn to this, though, it is important to define Eurocentrism and to enquire as to how it has become endogenized within world historical accounts as well as in Huntington's clash of civilizations thesis.

2.2 Eurocentrism in World History/Historical Sociology and the Clash of Civilizations Discourse

There have been many different lines of critique that have been aimed at Huntington's thesis, though the one that is relevant here is the broadly "postcolonial" one. I say "broadly" because not all the relevant critics are fully-fledged postcolonialists. Nevertheless, they all share the claim that Huntington's framework is Eurocentric (Salter 2002: ch. 7; Bowden 2009; Hobson 2007a; Bala 2009). Before proceeding to discuss this it is necessary to briefly outline the essentials of Eurocentrism as it emerges within world history/historical sociology and IR.

All non-Eurocentric world historians are agreed that the conventional literature on the rise of the West is founded on a Eurocentric metanarrative (Abu-Lughod 1989; Blaut 1993; Frank and Gills 1996; Frank 1998; Ponting 2000; Pomeranz 2000; Goody 1996, 2004; Hobson 2004: ch. 1; Bala 2006; Goldstone 2000, 2009). Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978/2003), though not the first to pinpoint the problem of Eurocentrism (see especially Hodgson 1974), was certainly received in the social sciences at large as the seminal statement. It is now accepted that Orientalism or Eurocentrism (I use these interchangeably) originally appeared by the mid-18th century during the European Enlightenment, as European thinkers went about trying to define Europe's place and identity in the world. Eurocentrism entails three critical assumptions: first, that what had previously been thought of as interlinked, if not symbiotic, Eastern and Western civilizations were suddenly relocated along either side of a constructed "civilizational line of apartheid". Second, Europe was pronounced as qualitatively superior to the East because it allegedly had uniquely progressive and exceptional characteristics, while the

East supposedly had only regressive properties. And third, by the early nineteenth century this conception of a superior/exceptional Europe had been retrospectively traced back to Ancient Greece, thereby painting an ahistorical picture of permanent Aryan and/or Western supremacy throughout the long period of the rise of the West (Bernal 1991; Amin 1989).

The major theories of the rise of the West, as well as the major theories of IR, endogenized this discourse into the heart of their accounts. How did this occur? First and foremost, the likes of Marx and Weber sought to explain Europe's rise by looking only to causal variables that exist squarely within Europe. This method has been called the Eurocentric "logic of immanence" (Hobson 2004: ch. 1). This reflects the points made above concerning the separation of civilizations as autonomous, self-constituting entities on the one hand, and Europe's uniqueness/exceptionalism that marked its long history since Ancient Greek times on the other. Thus Europe's genius was characterized by progressive virtues or properties: liberalism, democracy, science and individualism, all of which were founded on rationality or reason. By contrast, the East was constructed as Europe's opposite inferior Other, enduring only regressive "irrational" institutional properties: authoritarianism, Oriental despotism, mystical religions, and social collectivism. The upshot of the civilizational discourse was, for many though not all Eurocentrics, that only the West could self-develop into modernity. Standard Eurocentric accounts tread a familiar path, providing a picture of European development as akin to a journey of the Western "developmental train" (sometimes euphemistically dubbed the "Oriental Express" (Blaut 1993; Frank 1998; Hobson 2004). Typically, the train sets off from Ancient Greece and then passes through a series of Western way-stations. Having passed through Ancient Rome the train then steams on past European feudalism, through the Italian way-station that was marked by the commercial and financial revolution of the post-1000 era and on to the Renaissance, before it tracks northwestward, upto the Netherlands and Dutch hegemony, and then onto British industrialization and the Pax Britannica via the French Revolution. Of course for Marxists, this represents the penultimate stop before the train pulls into the terminus of communism.

However, for many, though not all, Eurocentrics, such a developmental journey is entirely absent in the East. And because the East was deemed by many Eurocentrics (though not all of them) to be incapable of self-development, so it was incumbent upon the West to engage in an imperial civilizing mission in order to "jump-start" the East onto the developmental track that ends at the terminus of civilization. Nevertheless, what is often not recognized within this literature is that many Eurocentric scholars rejected this paternalist side of Eurocentrism. Thus the likes of Adam Smith and Immanuel Kant adopted an anti-paternalist Eurocentrism and rejected Western imperialism while simultaneously believing that the East would eventually auto-develop into civilization. The anti-paternalist scientific racists – Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner – adopted a similar stance even if their scientific racism led them to depart from the Eurocentrism of Smith and Kant in certain respects (see Hall and Hobson 2009; Hobson 2009). In the light of these qualifications, we might conclude that Eurocentrism in various ways privileged the European developmental process and related in terms of an endogenous or immanent European journey. In this way, the idea that the West was enabled by the East through the "dialogue of civilizations" is lost and,

to the extent that other civilizations are considered at all, it is only in terms of clashes between autonomous, billiard-ball like entities. No less importantly, it has been claimed by various revisionist scholars that modern theorists of the rise of the West have retained this Eurocentric framework (for the critics see especially Goody 1996: ch. 1; Blaut 2000; Frank 1998: ch. 1; Hobson 2004: ch. 1; for key defenses by so-called “Eurocentric historians” see Jones 1981/2003: 239-259; Mann 2006: 370-384; Duchesne 2006; Landes 1998).

Turning back to Huntington, a number of scholars have pointed up the Eurocentric base of his theory, as referenced above. His Eurocentrism unfolds in stages. First of all, he adopts the standard Eurocentric analysis of the rise of the West, insisting that the West made it self without any help from the East (Huntington 1996: 50-2, 69-72, 311). As he put it:

The West differs from other civilizations... in the distinctive character of its values and institutions. These include most notably its Christianity, pluralism, individualism, and rule of law, which made it possible for the West to invent modernity, expand throughout the world, and become the envy of other societies. In their ensemble these characteristics are peculiar to the West. Europe, as Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., has said, is “the source – the unique source” of the “ideas of individual liberty, political democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and cultural freedom.... These are European ideas, not Asian, nor African, nor Middle Eastern ideas, except by adoption”. They make Western civilization unique, and Western civilization is valuable not because it is universal but because it is unique (Huntington 1996: 311).

Second, having laid out Europe’s exceptionalism he derives a Eurocentric politics, albeit one that *rejects* Western imperialism.

Western universalism is dangerous to the world because it could lead to a major intercivilizational war between core states and it is dangerous to the West because it could lead to a defeat of the West.... Western civilization is valuable not because it is universal but because it is unique. The principal responsibility of Western leaders, consequently, is not to attempt to reshape other civilizations in the image of the West... but to preserve, protect, and renew the unique qualities of Western civilization (Huntington 1996: 311; see also 318).

Accordingly, when he proposes his political project of “renewing and preserving the West” he, in fact, reaffirms a particular form of Western identity – one that is fundamentally Eurocentric. And as his final chapter clarifies, the prime responsibility of the US today is to police the Eurocentric line of civilizational-apartheid that serves to keep the contaminating influence of the East at bay. Indeed, from the Eurocentric seed planted in his most well-known book grew the subsequent text, *Who are We?*, in which Huntington launched a critique of Latin American immigration and its contaminating influence on the American Creed – referring to it as “Hispanization” (Huntington 2004).

At this point, though, the reader might become confused given that in the postcolonial imaginary, Eurocentrism is “bad” because it inevitably issues an imperialist posture. But as I explain elsewhere, Eurocentrism can equally issue an anti-imperialism as much as an imperialism (Hobson 2009; Hall and Hobson 2009). For Huntington’s politics

returns us to the late-nineteenth century discourse of Western anxiety concerning the “Yellow Peril”, with many Eurocentric thinkers arguing for the West to maintain its uniqueness as well as distance from the Eastern Other. And in turn, this leads to a politics of non-Western anti-immigrationism and anti-imperialism (e.g., Burgess 1895; Sumner 1911; Spencer 1902). Also of note back then was the pronounced American fear of Western population decline in the face of rising non-Western immigration, where such immigrants were also seen as more fertile than Anglo-Saxon stock; something that is also found in Huntington’s work (1996: ch. 5; see especially Salter 2002: 137-141).

Third, despite Huntington’s seeming rejection of a dualistic conception of civilizational relations, in the end he subscribes to precisely such an imaginary in which East and West are pitted against each other. Indeed at the very end of his 1996 book he refers to the “greater clash” or the “real clash”, which is that between the civilized West and the barbaric East. It is worth quoting this in full:

The futures of both peace and Civilization depend upon understanding and cooperation [not between East and West but] among the political, spiritual, and intellectual leaders of the world’s major civilizations. In the clash of civilizations, Europe and America will hang together or hang separately. In the greater clash, the global “real clash”, between Civilization [the West] and barbarism [the East], the world’s great civilizations [i.e., the West], with their rich accomplishments in religion, art, literature, philosophy, science, technology, morality, and compassion, will also hang together or hang separately. In the emerging era, clashes of civilizations are the greatest threat to world peace, and an international order based on civilizations is the surest safeguard against world war (Huntington 1996: 321).

All in all, it is argued that Huntington’s analysis of IR echoes the key features of the Eurocentrism found in Western world history and historical sociology, insisting that the West was self-made free from any help from non-Western civilizations and that to the extent that civilizations interact it is only through irredeemable conflict between East and West. How then does the rise of non-Eurocentric world history/historical sociology seek to provide a counter to Huntington’s conception of the clash of civilizations on the one hand, and his Eurocentrism on the other?

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