Can Civilizations Clash?[1]

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Professor Samuel P. Huntington published an article in *Foreign Affairs* in 1993 entitled "The Clash of Civilizations?" which evoked more discussion than that journal had stimulated for decades. Three years later, Dr. Huntington presented his thoughts in greater detail in a book with the question mark omitted from the title: *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order.* The following three quotations summarize his principal theses:

> In the post-Cold War world the most important distinctions among peoples are not ideological, political or economic. They are cultural.
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> . . . [C]ivilizations are the broadest cultural entities; hence conflicts between groups from different civilizations become central to global politics.
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> The key issues on the international agenda involve differences among civilizations.[2]

Huntington's theses and the policy recommendations that flow from them have been criticized vigorously by numerous specialists, most of them concentrating on what they consider his mistaken judgments regarding areas of their expertise, or on the specific policy recommendations he makes. I find many of these criticisms persuasive, but they are not my topic in this instance. I shall, rather, examine the concept of "civilizations" as Huntington uses the term and ask whether it is an appropriate concept to—as he puts it—"order and generalize about reality."

[1] Read 14 November 1997.

[2] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996). The three quotations are taken respectively from pp. 21, 128, and 29.

Huntington's Definition

Huntington imbeds his definition of "civilizations" in an extensive and admirably nuanced discussion of the concept as elaborated by a number of thinkers, from social scientists like Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Pitirim Sorokin, Immanuel Wallerstein, A. L. Kroeber, and Philip Bagby to historians like Oswald Spengler, Arnold Toynbee, and Fernand Braudel. Though he acknowledges that scholars who have written about civilizations have exhibited differences in perspective, methodology, focus, and concepts, Huntington asserts that "broad agreement" exists on "central propositions concerning the nature, identity, and dynamics of civilizations," and lists six of these propositions as follows:[3]

1. That there is "a distinction between civilization in the singular and civilizations in the plural," the first being the result of a qualitative judgment based on criteria presumed to be universal, while the second allows for multiple civilizations defined in a non-judgmental way.
2. That "a civilization is a cultural entity," "a culture writ large."
3. That "civilizations are comprehensive; . . . none of their constituent units can be fully understood without reference to the encompassing civilization." They "have no clear-cut boundaries" and "cultures interact and overlap," yet they are "meaningful entities" and "while the lines between them are seldom sharp, they are real."
4. That "civilizations are mortal but also very long lived; they evolve, adapt and are the most enduring of human associations."
5. That "civilizations are cultural, not political entities," that do not do the sort of things that governments do.
6. That scholars "generally agree" on the identification of major civilizations.

There is in fact broad agreement on the first of Huntington's propositions, but various scholars who have written on civilizations disagree on the other five questions at least as often as they agree. In his reflections on the topic, the great French historian Fernand Braudel wrote despairingly that "like other social specialists, historians who have concerned themselves with civilization have left us in great uncertainty as to what they actually mean by it."[4]

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[3] Ibid., 40–44.

[4] Fernand Braudel, *On History*, translated by Sarah Matthews (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 184. The French text can be found in Braudel, *Écrits sur l'histoire* (Paris: Flammarion, 1969), 266.

Most might agree, for example, that a "civilization" is a cultural entity, but they would disagree about what constitutes a "cultural entity," which is, after all, the more fundamental question. Does it include the material side of life, or is it largely or exclusively a question of how people think? For Jacob Burckhardt,[5] the state, religion, and culture were the three prime components of a civilization. Oswald Spengler[6] totally excluded the material side of life from his definition (even money is nothing more than "an inorganic magnitude"), and Arnold Toynbee[7] also gave scant attention to economics, considering religion all-important, while Kroeber, Bagby, and Braudel[8] would insist that culture and civilization encompass all aspects of social life, the material along with the mental and spiritual. As Braudel put it, "To discuss civilization is to discuss space, land and its contours, climate, vegetation, animal species and natural or other advantages. It is also to discuss what humanity has made of these basic conditions: agriculture, stock breeding, food, shelter, clothing, communications, industry, and so on."[9]

There is also disagreement about the claim that civilizations are comprehensive, in the sense that their components make up a coherent system. Toynbee defined his "civilizations" as the smallest "intelligible fields of historical study" and thought that individual countries can be understood only as a part of the civilization (or "society" which he used interchangeably with civilization) to which they belong. Sorokin, however, objected that Toynbee's civilizations were merely grab bags of unrelated elements that happened to be present at the same time in the same geographical area and had no causal connection with one another.

As regards Huntington's inconsistent statements about the borders of civilizations—he says they are not clear cut, yet mark "fault lines"—few of the authors he cites would consider them analogous to geological fissures.

Nor is there agreement that "civilizations" are necessarily mortal. Spengler thought they were; Toynbee was not sure, but suspected the worst; Immanuel Wallerstein rejected the very notion: "Civilizations

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[5] Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1929).

[6] Oswald Spengler, *Decline of the West* (New York: Knopf, 1926–28).

[7] Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, 12 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1934–61).

[8] A.L. Kroeber, *Configurations of Culture Growth* (Berkeley: University of California Press); Philip Bagby, *Culture and History: Prolegomena to the Comparative Study of Civilizations* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1958); Fernand Braudel, *A History of Civilizations*, translated by Richard Mayne (New York: Penguin Books, 1995).

[9] Braudel, *A History of Civilizations*, 9–10.

have not risen and fallen. Rather, world-empires have come into existence, flourished, and declined."[10]

Some scholars Huntington cites have doubted the utility of studying a civilization defined as "the West," and—as Huntington himself indicates—no two agree precisely where the dividing lines should be placed among various civilizations. Nevertheless, if the concept of clashing civilizations is to have any utility as an analytical tool, much less one with predictive capacity, the classification of countries by civilization is critical. On this point there is no consensus among those who have written of civilizations. Some, like Braudel, include Russia in "European civilization," while others exclude it. Some consider North and South America, along with Europe, part of the "West," while others consider that concept to be so broad as to be useless. Huntington would treat Russia and other countries professing Eastern Orthodoxy as members of a civilization different from the rest of Europe, would include the United States and Europe in a "Western civilization," but, with some qualification, exclude Latin America from the "West." This may or may not be a defensible division—I will discuss some of the implications later—but it is simply not true, as Huntington claims, that "scholars generally agree in their identification of the major civilizations in history and on those that exist in the modern world."[11]

Even if there were in fact general agreement on the six propositions Huntington advances, they would not adequately describe "civilizations" as he uses the term throughout his book. While his propositions contain numerous qualifications, he often ignores them when he describes and defends his hypotheses. For example, though Huntington denies that "civilizations" do what governments do or are structured as institutions, he compares them to one of the most structured of all human organizations in the following passage: "In a world where culture counts, the platoons are tribes and ethnic groups, the regiments are nations, and the armies are civilizations."[12]

Questionable Points

If we examine Huntington's application of the concept of multiple civilizations (as distinct from his discussion of its definition), we find several features that, upon close examination, seem highly dubious.

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[10] Immanuel Wallerstein, *Geopolitics and geoculture: Essays on the changing world-system* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 236.

[11] Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, 44.

[12] Ibid., 128.

First, his assumption that there is a high degree of coherence within the civilizations he postulates, which is pervasive in the book despite occasional caveats, is ill founded. The image of civilizations interacting to the point of conflict is that of entities sufficiently close-knit to be independent actors on the global stage. But civilizations, even as Huntington defines them, are not that at all. Pitirim Sorokin's criticism of Arnold Toynbee's concept is relevant.

> By "civilization" Toynbee means not a mere "field of historical study" but a united system, or the whole, whose parts are connected with one another by causal ties. Therefore, as in any causal system in his "civilization," parts must depend upon one another, upon the whole, and the whole upon its parts. . . .
>
> Is Toynbee's assumption valid? I am afraid it is not: his *"civilizations" are not united systems but mere conglomerations of various civilizational objects and phenomena . . . united only by special adjacency but not by causal or meaningful bonds.*[13]

In practice, Huntington makes the same error Toynbee did in assuming that the many disparate elements that make up his "civilizations" comprise a coherent, interdependent whole. They clearly do not, even if there are more causal relationships among the various elements than Sorokin was willing to admit.

Second, while he repeatedly refers to his civilizations as "the broadest level of cultural identity" or "the broadest cultural entities," he then assumes, without any real evidence, that breadth is correlated with intensity of loyalty. Why else would nations with similar cultures tend to cooperate, as he repeatedly asserts, while those with different cultures tend to fight? Why else should a state's "cultural identity" define its place in world politics?[14]

Actually, there are at least as many conflicts within the civilizations Huntington postulates as there are between them, probably more, in fact. But even if this were not true, there is no reason to assume that a person's loyalty inevitably expands to encompass an area defined by some scholar as a civilization. Any attachment beyond the nation state is likely to be weak (if recognized at all) except in limited contexts, such as a feeling of religious solidarity.

Third, Huntington states repeatedly, without any convincing evidence, that cultural differentiation is increasing in today's world. This

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[13] His emphasis. Pitirim A. Sorokin, "Toynbee's Philosophy of History," in M.F. Ashley Montagu, *Toynbee and History: Critical Essays and Reviews* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1956), 179–80.

[14] The central thesis of chapter 6, Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, 125–54.

flies in the face of most observations of the impact of modernization, industrialization, and the communications revolution, all global phenomena. Huntington is surely correct when he argues that modernization should not be considered synonymous with "westernization," and also that its progress will not obliterate cultural differences. Let us hope and pray that this is the case, since cultural differences are not only sources of potential conflict; they are also the spice of life. Many differences are benign, even productive, and the variety they contribute to civilization in the singular enriches all mankind.

Nevertheless, while there is no reason to believe that we are rushing pell mell into some universal culture, it seems perverse to deny that present trends are creating cross-cultural ties and even uniformities that did not exist before. This is particularly true in those important areas of life such as the work people do, their access to information about the world beyond their locality, and the structure of institutions that shape their economic and civic life. Most human beings are in fact becoming more alike in some parts of their lives, even as they retain and sometimes accentuate their differences in others.

I was bemused by many statements in Huntington's book, but none puzzled me more than the following: "Politicians in non-Western societies do not win elections by demonstrating how Western they are. Electoral competition instead stimulates them to fashion what they believe will be the most popular appeals, and those are usually ethnic, nationalist, and religious in character."[15]

I can only wonder how Huntington would characterize electoral competition in the West, and where he believes non-Western countries acquired the idea of electing political leaders. I can't find it in the Koran or Confucius.

Fourth, despite his extensive discussion of the difference between a culture and a civilization, in practice Huntington uses these words interchangeably in much of his discussion. This leads to repeated confusions, since a conflict sparked or exacerbated by cultural differences may or may not represent a "civilizational" divide. Many of the conflicts in which culture has played a role have been *within* the civilizations he postulates, and yet we often see a part cited as if it were the whole, an evident logical fault.

Furthermore, the concentration on "civilizational" conflict obscures and sometimes totally masks the elements of culture that contribute to conflict. Often, it is cultural similarity, not a difference, that nurtures conflict. Cultures that justify the use of force in disputes with

[15] Ibid, 94.

people who are perceived as somehow different are obviously more likely to resort to violence than are those that value accommodation. If two of the first type live in close proximity, the likelihood of conflict would be higher whether or not they belong to different "civilizations." Attributing conflicts to a priori intellectual constructs such as "civilizations" can mislead the observer about the real causes.

The conflict in Bosnia is a case in point. Huntington refers to it repeatedly as a civilizational conflict *par excellence*, since Bosnia is located astride the "fault lines" of three of the civilizations he postulates: Islamic, Western, and Eastern Orthodox. But most of those who examine that tragic conflict without presuppositions remind us that in highly secularized Bosnia, religion normally plays a minor role in public life. The people of Bosnia share language, culture, ethnicity, and history. They are of one, not several, cultures. But their culture has features that can be exploited by unscrupulous politicians to the point of violence: a sense of different identities despite close association over centuries; a sense of historical wrong, part fact, part myth; a tradition of the vendetta, to name only a few. The struggle there is ultimately one over political power, not part of some transcendental civilizational struggle.

Huntington argues that what makes conflict between civilizations more dangerous than that within them is the greater likelihood that it will expand to involve other powers as the initial parties to the conflict attract allies from their respective civilizations.[16] In the twentieth century, the classic example of a global conflict arising out of small beginnings is the outbreak of World War I in 1914 following the assassination of the Austrian archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo by a Serbian nationalist. World War I was not a "civilizational" conflict in Huntington's sense, but it showed that conflagrations can develop rapidly from a spark falling on dry brush. But what constitutes the "dry brush" that can turn a spark into an all-enveloping conflagration? Is it cultural difference, particularly that between "civilizations," or is it really something else, such as geopolitical rivalry?

When fighting broke out in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1992 with Serbs against Croats and both Serbs and Croats against Muslims, many

[16] "In this new world 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. Tribal wars and ethnic conflicts will occur within civilizations. Violence between states and groups from different civilizations, however, carries with it the potential for escalation as other states and groups from these civilizations rally to the support of their 'kin countries'" (Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, 28).

feared that, once again, a war involving great powers might develop from the sparks flying in the Balkan peninsula. If Huntington's thesis is correct, there was in fact a serious danger of a widening and escalating conflict since it was clear that Germany and many of its European allies had emotional ties to Croatia, Russia to Serbia, and Turkey and Islamic states to the Bosnian Muslims. What were these emotional ties if not civilizational loyalties?

Sympathies outside the region did in some cases—at least for a time—follow a pattern that would be predicted by a "civilizational" analysis. But not in all cases. The United States, for example, offered more support to the Muslim leadership in Bosnia than to either Croats or Serbs, and eventually NATO, with Russian forces participating, intervened to enforce a settlement that preserved a certain balance among the three major groups. It is also clear, and should have been clear throughout the crisis in Bosnia, that there was no real likelihood of the conflict's spreading beyond the immediate neighborhood, that is, much beyond the borders of the former Yugoslavia, although each of the parties had some "friends" abroad. It is one thing to express political support and to offer some economic or even military assistance, and quite another to commit regular forces to a struggle such as that in Bosnia.

Geopolitics and ideology explain the relations of outside parties to struggles in the Balkans, not "civilizational" sympathies. The latter do exist but in practice are normally subordinated to more powerful motivations. The shot in Sarajevo that killed the Austrian archduke gave rise to World War I because Austria and Russia were competing for power and influence over the territories spun off from a crumbling Ottoman Empire, and were backed by Germany on the one hand and France and Great Britain on the other, all of which perceived national interests in the alliances they had concluded. The international situation in Europe in 1914 was not duplicated in any important respect in the 1990s.

During the Cold War, as during the early years of this century, conflict in the Balkans could have spread dangerously if, for example, Yugoslavia had broken up, with the Soviet Union supporting the Serbs and NATO the others. Neither side would have been willing to allow the other to bring further territory under its sway, and conflict between them would have been conceivable. Given the presence of nuclear weapons in their arsenals, both sides had a strong incentive to discourage any breakup of the Yugoslav state. And, in fact, it was only after the Cold War, when none of the great powers had either a geopolitical stake or aspirations in Yugoslavia, that a breakup became feasible. In other words, the outside world allowed forces within Yugoslavia to

fragment the country because it was no longer geopolitically important to the major powers of the day.

Cultural affinities, throughout the twentieth century, have proven secondary to geopolitical realities. Far from proving Huntington's thesis, events in Bosnia have, if anything, disproved it. When outside parties finally intervened with force, it was not to favor a particular ally on civilizational grounds but to end the mayhem and establish a more balanced relationship among the contending parties.

Cultures, Not "Civilizations"

Huntington's thesis is not only deficient in predicting the most likely sources of conflict; by lumping cultures into broader civilizations, it obscures what we need to know if we are to understand the implications of cultural differences and similarities. Francis Fukuyama gives a striking example in his recent book, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity.* Discussing a boom in small-scale industry in central Italy in the 1970s and 1980s, he points out some cultural similarities with Hong Kong and Taiwan:

> Though it may seem a stretch to compare Italy with the Confucian culture of Hong Kong and Taiwan, the nature of social capital is similar in certain respects. In parts of Italy and in the Chinese cases, family bonds tend to be stronger than other kinds of bonds not based on kinship, while the strength and number of intermediate associations between state and individual has been relatively low, reflecting a pervasive distrust of people outside the family. The consequences for industrial structure are similar: private sector firms tend to be relatively small and family controlled, while large-scale enterprises need the support of the state to be viable.[17]

If we focus only on what Huntington calls "the broadest cultural entities," we lose the ability to detect and analyze specific cultural features that hold true across civilizations. And yet it is precisely such shared features that help us predict how rapidly specific institutions can spread from one culture to another, and what sort of modifications may result from their transplantation.

Huntington's tendency to exaggerate differences among the civilizations he postulates and to minimize commonalities, even when he recognizes them, is evident when he speculates about the future. For example, he predicts that, eventually, Greek ties to NATO will become

[17] New York: The Free Press, 1995, pp. 97–98.

"more tenuous, less meaningful, and more difficult," and that Turkey will "increasingly pursue its own distinctive interests," since Greece and Turkey do not belong to the civilization to which other members of NATO belong.[18] But one can make a strong case that Greece's adherence to the Orthodox church no more separates it politically from Western Europe than the Protestant established church in England makes it impossible for Great Britain to be an ally of Catholic Spain, its longtime rival. Greece's membership in the European Union is vital to its economic development and, given the political and military instability in much of the Balkan peninsula, no foreseeable Greek government is likely to see it in the country's interest to turn its back on the EU and NATO. Huntington cites a number of strains between Greece and other NATO members that he feels were overcome under the conditions of the Cold War, but will become less manageable in the future. However, it is not obvious that the strains he cites are the result of "civilizational" differences; none were as serious as, for example, the French withdrawal from NATO's military structure, or some unilateral decisions taken by the United States without consulting its allies. Much of Huntington's analysis is based on circular reasoning: if differences occur between countries in the same civilization, they illustrate only intra-civilizational differences; if, however, they are between countries Huntington has chosen to classify as members of separate civilizations, the differences are regarded as "civilizational."

As for Turkey, though its recent heritage is unquestionably Islamic and Muslim organizations are a social and political force, we are not likely to form prescient ideas of the future if we ignore the impact of the Young Turk revolution of the 1920s, the secular orientation of its governments since then, their conflict with the country's Kurdish minority (whose Islamic character does not seem to inspire emotions of commonality), its geopolitical rivalry with Russia and neighboring Islamic states, and its rivalry with Iran and Russia for influence in Central Asia and the isthmus lying between the Black Sea and the oil-rich Caspian. All these factors favor both continued membership in NATO and continued efforts to enter the European Union. They are almost certain to prevail over whatever sentimental ties Turks may continue to feel to other Islamic countries, particularly to those not of Turkic speech such as those in the Arab world, Iran, and Pakistan. Ethnicity and language are, after all, as important as religion in defining a culture. While it would be a mistake to ignore the influence of Turkey's Islamic heritage on Turkish society and politics, failing to take account of those

[18] Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, 162–63.

specific features that distinguish Turkey from other countries in the Islamic world undermines the credibility of any resulting analysis.

A Useful Concept Nevertheless

The faults I have described raise the question whether the analysis of "civilizations" has any utility at all. If one's goal is to understand the behavior of states and nations, it is clearly more important to understand the culture of these units than to presuppose behavior based on some broader cultural conglomerate. But if we define a "civilization" as simply the subject of an intellectual inquiry, it can be a useful term. As Fernand Braudel put it, "A civilization is first of all a space, a cultural area," and he goes on to say, "Whatever the label, there is a distinct French civilization, a German one, an Italian, an English one, each with its own characteristics and internal contradictions. To study them all together under the heading of Western civilization seems to me to be too simple an approach."[19]

Indeed, the broader the grouping, the more relevant detail is lost, and that which is lost may have a greater effect on behavior than traits held in common. Nevertheless, the extent of the cultural area to be studied is not the main point. There is nothing inherently wrong with looking at "Western civilization," however defined, for common cultural traits, studying how they developed, and examining how they are distributed within the area and how they interact with those of other societies. When used to define the scope of a study, the definition of a "civilization" can be based on any criteria the investigator chooses. Braudel, for example, wrote a magisterial work on the Mediterranean world at the time of Philip II.[20] It does not matter that this work fuses parts of three civilizations as defined by Toynbee or Huntington, since the area had its own coherence, one based on geography rather than religion or politics. As Braudel put it in his preface to the English translation, "I retain the firm conviction that the Turkish Mediterranean lived and breathed with the same rhythms as the Christian, that the whole sea shared a common destiny, a heavy one indeed, with identical problems and general trends if not identical consequences."[21]

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[19] Fernand Braudel, *On History*, 201–02; *Écrits sur l'histoire*, 291.

[20] Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (Paris: Colin, 1949; second edition, 1966); English translation (from second edition) by Siân Reynolds: *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, 2 vols. (London: Collins, 1972).

[21] Braudel, *The Mediterranean. . .*, 1: 14.

It is a mistake, however, to treat a hypothetical "civilization" as anything other than a convenient intellectual construct used to establish the boundaries of a field or topic of study. Even Toynbee, who treated his "civilizations" virtually as organisms, noted in his volume of *Reconsiderations*, ". . . [I]f the use of hypotheses is indispensable, it also has at least one besetting danger: 'the habit of treating a mental convenience as if it were an objective thing.'"[22] Unfortunately, Huntington's application of his concept of civilizations is tainted by this habit.

A civilization by any definition is infinitely more complex than, say, a garden. Nevertheless, describing it is in principle no different. Each garden is unique, yet some will have common characteristics not shared by others. Some plants will grow well in some soils and poorly if at all in others. Some plants may take over if moved to a different environment. Some gardens are laid out in a strict geometry; others may be left, in places at least, to resemble wild growth. If the gardener is not careful, the colors of some flowers may clash. Observers can classify gardens, compare them, discuss whether elements harmonize or not.

Gardens, like civilizations, can be described, analyzed and interpreted. But one thing is certain. It would be absurd to speak of a "clash of gardens." It is equally absurd to speak of a "clash of civilizations." If the concept were valid, it would provide a useful shortcut to understanding the tensions and potential conflicts in the world. But it is not a shortcut to understanding. Rather, it is a diversion leading to confusion. If we are to understand where future conflict is most likely and how it can best be averted or contained, we must keep our attention on the actors on the international scene: the states, the organized movements, the international alliances and institutions. Their cultures are relevant, but so are other factors such as geographical position, economic and military strength, and membership in or exclusion from international institutions. We gain nothing by lumping cultures into broader conglomerates, and we can be seriously misled if we assume that difference inevitably means hostility. Life, and politics, are not so simple.

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[22] Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, 12 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), 45.