Samuel P. Huntington. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*

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held belief that scholars should keep their minds open to views that challenged received opinion since – in the long run – such views might turn out to be correct. Galileo comes to mind.

His writing style was lucid and graceful. He was innately a gentleman while refusing to be bound by conventional wisdom and continually rejoicing in the coining of neologisms. We will miss him, and we should. He was one of a kind and a role model for scholarship driven by curiosity rather than careerism, an exceptional scholar and an exceptional man.

Corinne Lathrop Gilb
The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order

This book follows up the author’s 1993 article in Foreign Affairs, “The Clash of Civilizations?” Article and book provoked vigorous comment, among civilizationists and policy analysts both, since they drew political-action conclusions from an analysis of the current global situation which employed a civilizational perspective, partly derived from the common elements of the writings of civilizationists: Carroll Quigley, Arnold Toynbee, and Matthew Melko (e.g. 44).

Some central portions of Huntington’s civilizational argument are reasonably unambiguous; others are noticeably less so. The defining and bounding criterion of a civilization is its distinctive culture (40-43): objectively, a great religion is a central criterion (42, 47); subjectively, self-identification is important (43).

Huntington insists that the global order today is multicivilizational (28). This is in the first place rendered true by definition, since a civilization “is the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humanity from other species” (43), and since “identity at any level—personal, tribal, racial, civilizational—can only be defined in relation to an ‘other’” (129). Accordingly, “Civilizations are the biggest ‘we’ within which we feel culturally at home as distinguished from all the other ‘thems’ out there” (43).

But even if that definitional distinction were relaxed to allow for the possibility of people identifying with a common global culture, Huntington maintains that none exists objectively, since there is no actual or emergent universal language (59-64) or religion (59, 64-66). Furthermore, a “universal civilization requires universal power,” it implies a “universal empire” like Rome in Classical civilization (91-92); “a multicultural world is unavoidable because global empire is impossible” (318).

Huntington’s roster of the several civilizations which
today coexist is partly derived from Melko’s consensus of civilizationists (Sinic, Japanese, Hindu, Islamic, Western); this list is supplemented by Huntington’s own judgement that “it is useful in the contemporary world to add Orthodox, Latin American, and, possibly, African civilizations” (45). Orthodoxy is separated because of a distinct history and religion (45-46); Latin America is distinguished because of corporatism, authoritarianism, past Catholic uniformity, and ambiguous self-identification (46); and “conceivably sub-Saharan Africa could cohere into a distinct civilization” (47).

There are loose ends and ambiguities in definition and roster. Is Buddhism a ninth civilization (Map I.3), a minor civilization, a previous civilization (47-48)? Is there a Jewish civilization (48)? There was an Ethiopian civilization—is there still (47, 51, 136)? It is not clear why Christianity, alone of the “major” religions, should divide into three civilizations, or why the triplicity should be Orthodox, Western, and Latin American rather than Orthodox, Protestant and Catholic.

Civilizations rise and fall, are born and die (44). Huntington’s roster of dead civilizations is not explicitly constructed; but by inference and citation it must include Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Cretan, Classical, Andean and Mesoamerican (45, 49, 51). Huntington prefers the life cycle for a civilization asserted by Quigley: stages of mixture, gestation, expansion, conflict, universal empire, decay, invasion (302-303).

Huntington differs from his civilizationist sources in attending systematically to the existence of global history. In this he sees three distinct epochs in the parallel histories of the civilizations which have variously coexisted. To about AD 1500, with local exceptions, interactions between civilizations were relatively limited, most interaction being intracivilizational even when there was sustained or intense intercivilizational encounters (48-50). From 1500 to the twentieth century there was a “sustained, unidirectional impact of the West on all other civilizations” (50-53). In the twentieth century, this pattern was replaced by one of “intense, sustained, and multidirectional interaction.
among all civilizations” (54-55).

Even while denying the existence of a contemporary global civilization, Huntington accepts that there does exist a global and revolutionary social and cultural process of “modernization” which is increasing industry, cities, literacy, education, wealth, specialization, mobilization (68). This process is inexorable (72-73). But it has no implications of cultural homogeneity, nor of the “westernization” of the world (and a future global civilization); rather, modernization is strengthening the plurality of historic cultures (68-78).

Westernization is theoretically possible. Countries may shift their civilizational identities, if their elites are enthusiastic, the public acquiescent, the new host civilization welcoming (139). Such favorable conditions are rare; their absence precludes Westernization. Russia, Turkey and Mexico have thus far tried and failed to Westernize, and Australia to Asianize, becoming in the process culturally schizophrenic “torn countries,” to no profit (139-154).

Unhomogenized by the global modernizing process, unshaken by failed Westernization, civilizations remain spatially located, territorial, bounded, compact sociocultural units. Now and for the immediate future they abut one another as immediate neighbors (Map I.3), distinct parts of a single international system that lacks a common culture (54).

Accordingly this system has an intercivilizational balance of political, economic and military power (82). The distribution of cultures in the world reflects the distribution of power (91). Western civilization is currently dominant in this balance, but is in slow relative decline (81-91). This is especially reflected in the revival of non-Western religions: Islam, Hinduism, Orthodoxy. Confucianism, being secular, revives as “Asian values” (93-101).

While the challenges to the West from Hindu, Orthodox, Latin American and African civilizations take the form of the assertion of distinctiveness, more extensive challenges, asserting positive superiority, have emerged from Islam and “Asia” (102-
"Asia" itself emerges (102) as a dynamic "civilization," abruptly subsuming Sinic, Japanese, Buddhist and East Asian Muslim civilizations; "Asia" is distinguished by basically Confucian values and rapid economic development (103-109).

Contemporary global politics involves increasing cooperation within civilizations and increasing conflict across civilizational "fault lines" (124-135). The appropriate boundary for the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is the historic line demarcating western Christianity from Orthodoxy and Islam: Finland, the Baltic states, Poland, and Croatia are inside that line, Belarus, Ukraine, Romania, and Serbia are cleft by it (137-138, 159), Greece and Turkey outside it (162-163). China may be expected to rise to regional hegemony in East Asia, even over Japan (229-238, 241).

Another feature of the contemporary world is increasing conflict across civilizational "fault lines" (125, 129-130). Normal intercivilizational relations will be cool or hostile (207). Locally, the fault-line borders of Islamic civilization are particularly violent, and a large number of small wars should be expected there (183, 207-218, 246-265). Globally, the main conflicts are between the West on the one hand and Muslim and "Asian" societies on the other, with some "Confucian-Islamic" cooperation of an expedient character against the common enemy (183-185, 238-240).

Civilizations may or may not have "core states," powerful and culturally central. Japanese civilization is coextensive with the Japanese state; Russia, China, India are the core states of Orthodoxy, Sinic, and Hindu civilizations; the West has two cores, America and France-Germany; Islam, Latin America, and Africa lack core states and have only candidates (135-136, 177-179).

Contemporary global politics is characterized by increasing intracivilizational order around core states and intercivilizational order and struggle between core states (156). Huntington expounds in some detail, and diagrams, the predicted pairwise intercivilizational relations of eight contemporary civilizations (240-245). The main danger of intercivilizational war arises...
from potential US resistance to the rise of Chinese hegemony in East Asia (209, 218-229, 312-316).

The United States has no significant global security interests, nor does any other country (156). Nevertheless, Huntington provides some guidelines for the intermission of fault-line wars, which I will not summarize here (291-298).

Huntington diagnoses Western civilization as entering its Toynbeean/Quigleyan stage of “universal state” or “universal empire.” But the Western version of universal empire, reflecting the peculiarity of Western civilization, is not centralized and bureaucratic, but federal, confederal, and pluralistic (53, 70-71, 302). As in other civilizations, the Western universal-state phase may be expected to be a “golden age” of intracivilizational peace and prosperity (302), whose chief internal challenge is the threat of decay (303).

Indeed, the threatening end of the golden age seems to have preceded its arrival. Huntington sees “moral decline, cultural suicide, and political disunity in the West” as its main potential sources of decay (304). Moral decline is evidenced by crime, drug use, violence, family decay, shrinkage of voluntary associations, weakening of the work ethic, and decreasing commitment to learning (304); multiculturalism implies the destruction of the United States and hence the West (304-307); the dual Euro-American core of the West is a another source of weakness (307-308).

Given a Western identification, policy conclusions follow from Huntington’s analysis. The United States should reject multiculturalism, reaffirm Western culture (307), accept leadership in the West, and preferentially develop Euro-American cooperative institutions (307-308). NATO should expand only to the Orthodox-Islamic boundary of Western civilization, letting Greece and Turkey drift away (309). The West should cease intervening in the affairs of other civilizations to export its values, but instead preserve those values where they are (310-312). Since civilization-shifting has uniformly failed, countries should
Eschew it and modernize within existing civilizations rather than tearing themselves apart (139, 154). Westernization should be encouraged only in already semi-Western Latin America (240-241, 312); de-Westernization should be expected in Africa (241); Japan should be expected to drift toward China, but the drift should be slowed as feasible (236-237, 241, 312).

Russia should be treated as the core state of a different civilization and left to secure its Orthodox cohorts and its own Islamic borders (242, 312). The West should seek to maintain a general technical and military superiority over other civilizations, and to restrain the military growth of Islamic and Sinic countries (312). A Sino-American war should be avoided via a rule of core state nonintervention in the internal affairs of other civilizations, and a rule that core states negotiate to contain or halt fault line wars (316).

The United Nations Security Council should be reorganized on civilizational lines, adding permanent seats for Japan and India, consolidating the British and French seats into a rotating EU seat, and adding three permanent seats to rotate among African, Islamic and Latin American states (317-318). And, despite all that has gone before, people from different civilizations should search for and attempt to expand the commonalities among all civilizations which can define “Civilization” as such. This might give birth to a universal civilization, and could resist a simultaneous global decay and barbarization of all the civilizations (320-321).

This is a work of broad sweep. Though more explicitly policy-oriented than the civilizationist works of Toynbee, Quigley and Melko on which it most draws, it is not a dependent popularization, but attempts to go beyond these sources and address creatively some problems in their analyses. The idea that a Western universal state would be federal and pluralistic in the general Western style is a speculation which carries some conviction.

That said, Huntington’s argument raises more questions than it answers, and the validity of the answers it gives is depen-
dent upon the character and persuasiveness of the answers yet to be found. The civilizational perspective is for Huntington a “framework” or “paradigm” for viewing global politics which is to be judged for its relative meaningfulness and utility in viewing international developments; he confines his claims for its utility to the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (13-14). This seems to place Huntington at odds with all three theorists on whom he mainly draws, who considered civilizational analysis transhistorically valid, and valid for the various times in which they wrote, not excepting the Cold War era for which Huntington specifically treats it as invalid (19-21).

Using Huntington’s civilizational roster, it does not seem accurate to say that “In the post-Cold War world, for the first time in history, global politics has become multipolar and multicivilizational” (21), given that in, say, World War II, the main combatants included states which should be assigned to Huntington’s Western, Orthodox and Japanese civilizations, and that all his other civilizations supplied belligerents, battlefields or both.

The theorists on whom Huntington draws tended to see the civilizations they identified as in some essential way culturally uniform and coherent, a factually quite problematic contention in which he concurs. Huntington’s disproof of the claim that a universal civilization already exists raises several difficulties. The defining criteria for a civilization allow polyglot, polycultural, multistate entities (e.g. the West) to qualify as “civilizations” except at the global level. There the absence of a universal language (59-64), of a universal religion (64-66) and of a universal state (91-92) are applied as criteria which demonstrate the nonexistence of a universal civilization.

If consistently applied, these tests would also demonstrate the nonexistence of Western civilization; instead, “multiplicity of languages” is simply a distinctive feature of Western civilization (70), which is also allowed to be bi- or tri-religious (Protestant and Catholic, 70; and see the note on Judaism, 48). Internal cultural diversity is likewise permitted to Sinic civilization (for which Confucianism is only “a major component,” 45), still more
to “Asian” civilization (102). When the existence of a global civilization is being denied, the link between power and culture becomes central, so that a “universal civilization requires universal power” (91-92); but when the several civilizations are discussed, it is quite possible for a civilization to contain one or many political units, and most contain more than one (44).

This contradiction requires urgent resolution, which can however only come about at the expense of “Western civilization.” If civilizations must be monocultures – monolingual, monoreligious – within a single political unit, Western civilization dissolves into a crowd of nation-state civilizations, and even they are often suspiciously pluralistic. If, however, civilizations may be pluralistic politically and culturally – which I believe is the better choice – then, with consistent application of criteria, the “objective” case against the current existence of a global civilization, of which the West is only a highly significant subregion, simply vanishes. A pluralistic global civilization already exists.

When Huntington asks whether a global civilization could ever form, we would prefer to ask, can the existing and pluralistic global civilization ever become monocultural? Huntington is equivocal on this point (320-321), but mostly skeptical. One pillar of his skepticism about the future of a global culture is the idea that every “we” needs a “they” to know itself; yet, as Huntington points out (21), before the Cold War the nations of the West were able to serve one another both as “we” and as “they,” as an identity community and as bitter enemies. It would seem more consistent then for Huntington to have forecast that, if a global culture were to form around some core of values, the macrocultural perspective would once again cease to be the key to the analysis of global politics, which would revert to an internecine fraternal strife among states and movements within a single macroculture.

Could such a value community be based on a spread of “Western” values, e.g. freedom, democracy, universal rights? Huntington’s radical distinction between modernization and Westernization, and his rejection of the proposition that the
Westernization of the world will accompany its modernization, rests partly upon a belief in the durability of cultural identity; yet both Islam in its first century, and Huntington’s “Asian civilization” in its first decades, should surely have been cited as extreme counterexamples to this view, given the speed with which they must have produced re-identifications, on a generational rather than a glacial scale. The timescales of macrocultural turnovers need to be measured better, but, as with geology, it is likely that there are both “uniformitarian” and “catastrophic” process timescales.

By contrast with Huntington, his acknowledged predecessor Toynbee considered a “Future oecumenical civilization, starting in a Western framework and on a Western basis, but progressively drawing contributions from the living non-Western civilizations embraced in it” (A Study of History XII, 559) to be possible, and asserted that the world was in fact “in the process of being unified morally and socially as well as technologically and militarily” by way of a “conscious and deliberate advance toward brotherhood in a community embracing the whole human race” (571-572). It is not clear that he was entirely mistaken.

Huntington deserves to be appreciated by civilizationists for attempting to systematically apply a civilizational analysis to global politics, for trying to bring that analysis into some clear relation to the global phenomenon of “modernization,” and for seeking to come to grips with the analytical problems arising out of the growth to collision of previously separated civilizations. The problems, well raised, are not resolved; let the struggle continue.

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