
Book Review

Review of *The Clash of Civilizations: Remaking of World Order* by Samuel P. Huntington. Simon & Schuster, 1996. 367 pages, \$23 paper.

Civilizational Clash: Deep Green Implications

Review by David Orton

The revolt against the West was originally legitimated by asserting the universality of Western values; it is now legitimated by asserting the superiority of non-Western values. (p. 93)

The West is . . . attempting to integrate the economies of non-Western societies into a global economic system which it dominates. (p. 184)

Introduction

This is a complex, erudite and thoughtful book, which has changed how I look at the international social and political order. It is required as a post-September 11th, 2001 insightful reading, even though it was published several years before this wake-up event. The author, a US political scientist, was “the director of security planning for the National Security Council” in the White House regime of Jimmy Carter. So Huntington has had access to a lot of very interesting behind-the-scenes data denied to lesser mortals. The ideas in this book were first presented in a lecture at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington. It is strange for this reviewer to urge others to read a book that has on its cover endorsements by people (reactionaries from my perspective) like Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and newspapers like *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. This book has also been denounced by some on the Left as written by a right-winger and therefore, presumably, of no significance. The negative references to this book, which I seem to frequently encounter in post-September 11th readings, perhaps have to do with the thesis advanced that the West is in a period of increasing tension, particularly with two civilizations: the Islamic and the Sinic world (China and countries in close geographic influence). Huntington

is no liberal or left-winger, he accepts the West “restraining” the military power of Islamic (“Islam has bloody borders”) and Sinic countries, and “maintaining” technological and military superiority over other civilizations (p. 312).

I believe the endorsements by the US establishment can be understood because of the author’s “realism” and the provision of what is seen as sage interventionist advice: “The preservation of the United States and the West requires a renewal of Western identity. The security of the world requires acceptance of global multiculturalism” (p. 318). By Western civilization/identity, I am following Huntington’s analysis, and speaking of that civilization which arose around 700 or 800 AD, and whose components today include Western Europe (NATO members), North America, the settler countries of Australia and New Zealand and possibly Latin America, although this area of the world has yet to determine its ultimate orientation.

As someone who had been shaped in my past thinking by an engagement with Marxism, where religion is essentially defined as an “opiate,” I have come to see, since September 11th, that various religions, including Islam, are far more important in the consciousness of people than I had previously believed. Religions, mediated by cultures, help shape how people engage with the social world *and* with the natural world. (The natural world concern is, unfortunately, not to be found in this book.) But Huntington’s book has helped my understanding of how Civilizations appear to thrust humans towards the re-sacralizing of human societies. For deeper greens, this is not the re-sacralizing (making sacred in an animistic sense) of the natural world, necessary to stop the Earth’s despoliation through capitalist commodification. Also, theocratic or religion-based societies seem to need “out” groups for self-definition purposes. Not everyone, it seems, can be “chosen”, and we have such words as “heathen,” “infidel,” and “goy” to help define the religious unwashed. In Huntington’s book, true friends require true enemies: “For peoples seeking identity and reinventing ethnicity, enemies are essential, and the potentially most dangerous enmities occur across the fault lines between the world’s major civilizations” (p. 20).

Civilizations and Discontent

Huntington is saying that today, in global politics, it is civilizations, not ideologies or nation states, that become the driving force of what passes for social order or disorder. The countries in this world are grouping themselves around or in alliance with the core or leading states of the

various civilizations with which they identify. Some civilizations, for example Islamic and African, have yet to see the definite emergence of “core” states. The author speaks of seven or eight major civilizations in our world: Western, Islamic, Sinic, Hindu, African, Latin American (perhaps), Orthodox-Russian, Buddhist, and Japanese. The end of the Cold War has come to mean that peoples are not divided along ideological lines but along civilizational lines. In these civilizational self-identities, there is little room for ecology (which is not discussed in this book), but there seems to be an increasingly central role for religion: “To a very large degree, the major civilizations in human history have been closely identified with the world’s great religions” (p. 42).

As Huntington points out, the war in Bosnia was a war between representative states allying themselves with three distinct civilizations and religions: “Western governments and elites backed the Croats, castigated the Serbs, and were generally indifferent to or fearful of the Muslims” (p. 289). On the other hand, the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s was a struggle between ideologies and political systems.

This is how the author describes the evident resurgence of religions which we see around us:

The religious resurgence throughout the world is a reaction against secularism, moral relativism, and self-indulgence, and a reaffirmation of the values of order, discipline, work, mutual help, and human solidarity. Religious groups meet social needs untended by state bureaucracies... The breakdown of order and of civil society creates vacuums which are filled by religious, often fundamentalist groups. (p. 98)

Civilizational identity increasingly guides the orientation of nation states. This book is about how we now define ourselves and what this means for contemporary political activity. The author has a conventional US, anti-communist view, “democracy” is capitalist-style democracy, and he sees NATO as “the security organization of Western civilization” (p. 161) in the aftermath of the Cold War. Reading this book, whether or not we like the analysis, shows, for those who seek a deep green world with Earth-centred values which are also socially just, what we have to contend with and understand.

Cultural or civilizational definitions have come to the foreground. Huntington seems to be saying that the United States should not fight battles it cannot ultimately win (the current Bush Administration does not seem to be listening), but that interventions in world political affairs should be to assist Western civilization. This, from someone who takes it for granted that the US is the leader of Western civilization, even

though this civilization, arguably the most powerful at the present time, is in decline relative to other, ascending, civilizations. For Huntington, the underlying assumption is that Western civilization is in some sense the best and other civilizations also need this Western heritage. Yet there is not an out-and-out Western arrogance in this book, because the author opposes the “parochial conceit that the European civilization of the West is now the universal civilization of the world” (p. 55). Any claims to Western “universalism” for Huntington are self-delusions, “pretensions” and “dangerous.” Western civilization should be seen as unique but not universal. He differentiates between “Westernization” and “modernization” and says that other civilizations, through their various nation states, are seeking to modernize, not Westernize. Huntington also believes that each major civilization should be represented on the Security Council of the United Nations with at least one seat. The present Council reflects only post-Second World War reality

Contradictions and Disagreement

1. Ecological ignorance would be my primary criticism of this book and its enormous weakness. The author shows absolutely no awareness of the ecological impact of increased economic growth on the Earth and non-human life forms. More economic growth and strength simply leads to more influence for a nation and increased military spending for Huntington. He is totally anthropocentric in orientation. (Huntington is aware of the population pressure resulting from the pro-natalist Islamic religion.) His basic ecological limitation is shown when he defines “self” solely in social and cultural terms, with world citizens ending up in one civilization or another. While this is, I believe, unfortunately the existing social reality, we are first and foremost “Earthlings.” The Earth is our basic reference and the carrier of primary values. It is this ecocentric world view which gives basic meaning to our lives, not support for a religion, a state, a civilization, a cultural community, an extended family, or so on. All humans, irrespective of their religious beliefs or civilizational allegiance, need to come to think of themselves first as Earthlings. This must come to fundamentally shape their basic self-identity before anything else. Given this, we need to draw from all civilizations for our social identities, not just the West.

2. There is an absence of any class analysis or any consideration of the role played by trans-national corporations in this book.

3. Huntington seems to accept a multicivilizational world but not apparently for the United States. This is a policy of exclusivity for large minorities of US citizens:

A multicivilizational United States will not be the United States; it will be the United Nations. . . . The futures of the United States and of the West depend upon Americans reaffirming their commitment to Western civilization. Domestically this means rejecting the divisive calls of multiculturalism. Internationally it means rejecting the elusive and illusory calls to identify the United States with Asia . . . Americans are culturally part of the Western family; multiculturalists may damage and even destroy that relationship but they cannot replace it. When Americans look for their cultural roots, they find them in Europe. (pp. 306, 307)

Conclusion

I have found this book very helpful, with its focus on the new role played by civilizations and world religions in contemporary politics. One can say that Marxism has paid little attention to cultural factors but where this “Western” ideology has had ongoing longevity, is where it has engaged with what seem to be compatible Confucian and Taoist values!

I do find the analysis in *The Clash of Civilizations* as “too inevitable.” If Huntington’s views hold out, then there is little hope to exit the environmental quagmire which we are in. Yet, as well as raising the deep ecology flag, all of us need to address the role of religious fundamentalisms: Christian, Islamic, Judaic, Hindu, and so on, and how to undercut them. This book is useful in this latter regard. Living in any theocratic state, no matter which religion it is based on, would be very bad news for most of us, as for fellow non-human Earthlings. We cannot overcome religious fundamentalism if we ignore social injustice and also attempt to impose on others our own Western economic fundamentalism.

I think it is necessary to try and outline, for those of us in the West, what are the positive accomplishments of this civilization that need upholding. It is a civilization that has accomplishments as well as crimes to its history. If we do not do this, then the capitalist economic fundamentalists will put forward their paradigm: free markets, rule of law, individualism, competition, as the legacy of the West that we should defend and, if necessary, if those in the White House have their way, that we should be prepared to die for.