

THE CLASH OF CIVILISATIONS

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Strategic Paranoia: The Career of a Cold Warrior

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Note: This is an informal essay, and should not be quoted from or cited.

As an intellectual work, *The Clash of Civilizations* is very slight, even trivial. The delineation of seven or eight civilizations makes little sense historically or geopolitically. It is not hard to argue—and many have---that conflicts and clashes occur within these supposed civilizations. The West itself is a varied, complex and dynamic entity. Gandhi, definitively shaped by the Bible and *Unto This Last*, was no less a product of the West than his bitter detractor, Winston Churchill.

The West can be found far beyond its geographic boundaries, in the hearts of romantic nationalists and socialists dreaming of equality, liberty and fraternity as well as of affluent classes longing for expatriation to Europe and America. The great majority of the underprivileged---including devout Pakistanis as well as atheistic Syrian refugees---fails to show up for the much-advertised clash between their ‘civilizations’ and that of the West. Most people maintain their political and religious commitments while drawing what they need from the world’s diversity of societies and cultures. It is also true that Pol Pot was as much a bearer of Western ideologies as Hitler.

In any case cultural difference is hardly the central or even important motivating factor in wars, which are caused by scarcities of resources, competing claims on territory, and conflicting agendas on trade. The whole notion of civilizational conflict actually prevents us from fully understanding actually existing conflicts and rivalries in the world today. It is blind as much to the integrating and disruptive effects of globalization as to the continuing potency of nationalism.

It is safe to say that an Indian intellectual would have struggled get such a shoddy work as *The Clash of Civilizations* published, let alone have it discussed, twenty years after its publication, at University College, London. What makes Huntington interesting is his location: as a stalwart of the American cold-war intellectual industry, staffed largely in its early days by White Anglo-Saxon Protestants like himself, and what makes his books illuminating is not so much what is inside them as when he wrote each of them, in response to what historical conjuncture.

It is as a sociological and historical phenomenon that Huntington is best understood. Certainly, it is impossible to grasp his influence without examining the post-1945 climate of ideas in the United States as it set out to achieve universal secular transformation through democracy and capitalism.

In Europe, the 19th century’s certainties – primary among them Western universalism, the old Christian claim to be able to create a life of universal validity now transposed into secular millenarianism – had been undermined by historical calamities. If the First World War exposed the fragility of liberal democracy across Europe, the Second World War dealt a serious blow to Britain’s capacity to export or implant its institutions. But, in a strange twist of history, the fantasy of disseminating Anglo-American ideals and institutions worldwide was revived after 1945 and made central to political and economic thinking by Britain’s successor, the United States.

The US enjoyed an extraordinary growth in military and economic power during the two world wars that levelled much of Europe and Asia. This national expansion at a time of worldwide trauma and mayhem (which makes America truly exceptional and explains, among other things, the invincible can-doism of its politicians and publicists) helped resurrect Europe's discredited universalist philosophies of history and progress.

American cold warriors embarked in the 1950s in an ambitious attempt to seduce postcolonial Asia, Africa and Latin America away from communist-style revolution and into the gradualist alternative of consumer capitalism and democracy. Modernization along American lines became the creed that glorified the sovereign liberty of the autonomous rights-bearing man and hailed his rational choice-making capacity as freedom. Economic growth in general was posited as the end-all of political life and the chief marker of progress worldwide, not to mention the gateway to happiness. Communism was totalitarian. Ergo its ideological opponent, American liberalism, represented freedom, which in turn was best advanced by moneymaking.

Huntington appeared to be at a tangent to mainstream modernization theorists, and their Whiggish assumption: that middle and other aspiring classes created by industrial capitalism bring about accountable government. Huntington questioned whether social and economic transformation in developing societies is always benign or leads to democracy. But this line of enquiry, conducted under the auspices of the military-industrial complex, ended up as a high-class intellectual justification for crony capitalism and military brutality of the kind Indonesia's Suharto specialised in.

Huntington's 1968 book *Political Order in Changing Societies* seems, in terms of political effect, more influential – and malign – than *The Clash of Civilizations*. Pro-American despots from Suharto to South Korea's Park Chung-hee and the Shah of Iran, and their American-trained advisors, took careful note of Huntington's emphasis on the utmost necessity of political stability and military modernisation. Huntington, aware of his devoted readers among Asian technocrats, hailed the Shah of Iran as the epitome of a 'modernizing monarch.' He claimed that Pakistan's military dictator Ayub Khan came close, 'more than any other political leader in a modernising country after World War Two,' to 'filling the role of a Solon or Lycurgus, or "Great Legislator" of the Platonic or Rousseauian model' (Ayub was shortly thereafter forced out of power).

Bernard Lewis was also among the cheerleaders of secular modernization as he lionized Ataturk and upheld Turkey as a great success and model for other Muslim countries. Indeed, his vision of a Turkey Westernized and modernized by the enlightened autocrat's ukase was at the core of George W. Bush's vision of bringing democracy at gun point to Iraq. Reassuring counsel came from Fouad Ajami, a senior advisor to Condoleeza Rice, who said that the United States is particularly 'good at releasing communities from the burden of the past, and from the limits and confines of a narrow identity.'

Many these intellectuals are appalled when, as often happens, an unfamiliar generation of long-bearded activists and thinkers speaking of Islam rise out of the ruins of failed experiments in nation-building, representative government, industrialization, urbanization, and regime-change. 'Political Islam is rage, anarchy,' V.S. Naipaul charged after visiting the Islamic Revolution in Iran, contrasting Islam's obsession with ideological purity to the generous 'universal civilization' of the West based on the pursuit of happiness. Salman Rushdie claims that Iran in the late 1960s was 'wonderful' a 'very cosmopolitan, very cultured society' and 'the arrival of Islamic radicalism in that country, of all countries, was particularly tragic because it was so sophisticated a culture.'

Fear of bushy-bearded activists continues to motivate many in the West to shun them, even when they are democratically elected, and seek tough-minded secular strongmen, such as Egypt's clean-shaven military despot, who can keep the angry hordes at bay, and bring their countries closer to the West. Many commentators continue to insist that things went wrong in many Muslim countries because of the irredeemable backwardness of Islamic 'civilization,' and its fundamental and ineradicable hostility to the modern West.

Let's not forget that Bernard Lewis popularized this opposition in his 1986 article 'The Roots of Muslim Rage.' He wrote,

We are facing a mood and a movement far transcending the level of issues and policies and the governments that pursue them. This is no less than a clash of civilizations— the perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both.

Glossing Lewis's claim, Samuel Huntington added that 'this centuries-old military interaction between the West and Islam is unlikely to decline. It could become more virulent.' This line of criticism really became prominent after the Islamic revolution in Iran, which came as a major shock to American liberal universalists. The whole language of civilizational clash that we have now become familiar with is a product of this experience of shock and bewilderment at watching the American project in Iran collapse into defeat and ignominy.

What happened was this: American intellectuals had invested much faith in leaders who claim to be introducing their superstitious societies to scientific rationality, if not democratic pluralism. In this, they followed in the tradition of ambitious Enlightenment intellectuals, for whom the East was a career for long before European colonialists invaded and occupied large parts of Asia and Africa. 'There are still vast climates in Africa,' Voltaire wrote, 'where men have need of a Tsar Peter.' The Enlightenment *philosophes*, who supported the violent imperialist adventures of Catherine of Russia and Frederick of Prussia, failed to see that their despotic patrons were primarily interested in expanding their empire and boosting the power of the despotic state by rationalizing military and bureaucratic institutions.

Failure of top-down modernization was also inevitable in the postcolonial world which became in the mid-20th century a new laboratory for social engineering, a fresh testing site for the Enlightenment ideals of reason and progress. The *philosophes* had aimed at rationalization, or the "uniformization," of a range of institutions inherited from an intensely religious era. Likewise, postcolonial leaders planned to educate illiterate peasants into educated citizens, industrialize the economy, move the rural population to cities, alchemize local solidarities into a singular national identity, replace the social hierarchies of the past with an egalitarian order, and promote the cults of science and technology among a pious and often superstitious population.

As we know, the autocratic modernizers failed to usher a majority of their wards into the modern world, and their abortive revolution from above paved the way for more radical ones from below. There were many reasons for this, primary among the legacy of imperialism—the division of the Middle East into mandates and spheres of influence, the equally arbitrary creation of unviable nation-states, unequal treaties with oil-rich states—and the pressures of neo-imperialism. Even when free of such crippling burdens, the modernizers could never simply repeat Europe's antecedent development, which, in any case, had been calamitously uneven, pushing large populations into demagogic politics, mass emigration, ethnic cleansing and total wars.

Moreover, as Western Europe itself was rapidly transformed and empowered by its economic miracle in the post-war era, and the United States emerged as the most powerful

country in history, the postcolonial world had to telescope into two or three decades the political and economic developments that had taken more than a century in Europe and America.

The new nation-states failed to be a *tabula rasa*, no matter how hard the modernizers, as in Turkey, tried to eradicate the fez, and replace the Muslim calendar, Arabic numerals and measures with the European clock, calendar, numerals and by continental European weight and measures. The rationalized state manifested itself in ordinary lives less by social welfare institutions than by brutal law enforcement and intelligence agencies, such as Savak in Iran and the Mukhābarāt of many Arab countries. Tocqueville, remarking on the ‘modernization’ efforts of Frederick the Great in the 18th century, summed up early the results achieved by enlightened despots in many Muslim countries.

Beneath this completely modern head we will see a totally gothic body appear; Frederick had only eliminated from it whatever could hinder the action of his own power; and the whole forms a monstrous being which seems to be in transition between one shape and another.

Thus, the manifold revolutions from above faltered; Muslim countries remained for the most part economically ‘under-developed’ and, at best, stuck in the limbo of ‘developing’ nations. And even their relative successes in approximating the Western model---introducing a semblance of civil order through the police, diminishing the power and privileges of old elites, clerical, feudal and aristocratic, or extending Western-style education---had ambiguous results.

The mullahs and landlords lost some of their autonomy, social function and hereditary status. Desires for a libertarian and egalitarian order grew within the nascent civil society, especially among young men educated in Western-style institutions. But new inequalities, created by the bureaucracies of the modern state and the division of labor and specialization required by industrial and commercial economies, accreted on top of old ones.

The cultural makeover forced upon socially conservative masses aggravated a widely felt sense of exclusion and injury. The radical disruptions left a large majority of the unprivileged to stew in resentment and envy against the top-down modernizers and Westernizers. A typical agitator spawned during these decades was Abu Musab al-Suri, the chief strategist and ideologue for al Qaeda. Born the same year (1958) as Osama bin Laden, to a devout middle-class family in Aleppo, al-Suri dropped out of university in 1980 to join a radical group which opposed Syria’s secular nationalist Baath Party and advocated an Islamic state based on Shariah. Working his way through various Islamist organizations in Asia and Africa, al-Suri ended up designing a leaderless and global jihad for uprooted men like himself.

But the much more significant revolt occurred in Iran, against the autocrat Huntington had praised as the epitome of a modernizing monarch. The Islamic Revolution was, as Foucault called it, the ‘first great insurrection against global systems, the form of revolt that is the most modern and the most insane.’ And it plunged American observers into extreme confusion, forcing them to reckon with the political potency of something they had barely considered: Islam.

An Islamic upsurge raised huge problems of interpretation. After all, cold warriors on both sides shared a faith in modernization as a benign, unproblematic process; they were in this sense children of the Enlightenment, fighting with different visions of how modernity was to be achieved. Khomeini, however, seemed to range himself against modernity itself. He and his Islamic revolution could not be understood as part of any modern process emanating in the Enlightenment.

Islam then had to be classified as fundamentally and irrationally opposed to modern Western civilization. Huntington, glossing Bernard Lewis, accomplished a crucial move among Cold Warriors: from conceiving of America's challenges as ideological warfare with a modern adversary to civilization conflict with a primordial enemy. This is where his achievement lies: in giving a new framework to the military-intellectual complex, and keeping the alliance of powerful white men together in the face of new threats to their supremacy.

Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations* was also written as an urgent riposte to Fukuyama's influential 'end of history' thesis. A grizzled cold war veteran like Huntington naturally saw in it the naivete of a younger Japanese-American colleague. He was fearful that the unfreezing of the cold war could release all kinds of particularist demands that threatened the unipolar world created by the United States after 1945. He had already doubled down in *The Third Wave* (1991) which argues that elites in charge of a strong state were best able to preserve order and effectively deal with "primordial" claims.

But it is Huntington's last book that identifies his national, racial, and class affinities most clearly. *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* is obsessed with the destruction of white American culture by Hispanic immigration---a theme taken up vigorously, as we now see, by American demagogues working up angry white men, and promising to make America great again.

The *trahison des clercs* of the 18th century illuminated early the private fears and longings of establishment or upwardly mobile intellectuals that are often at stake in supposedly cosmic moral battles between freedom and authoritarianism, modern reason and medieval unreason. We can see now that Huntington's career illustrated vividly the same dismal syndrome as he moved from praising the Shah of Iran to predicting a clash between civilizations and fretting about the destruction of WASP culture.