The Improbability of a Clash of Civilizations
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When I first read Samuel P. Huntington's essay on The Clash of Civilizations in the summer issue 1993 of Foreign Affairs, I overlooked the question mark behind the title. After all, the substance of his arguments did not leave many doubts about the direction of his thoughts. When the book version appeared in 1996, the question mark was deleted and replaced with a second part to the title phrase and the Remaking of World Order. The full title of the book reads The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order. Removing the question mark did not change the central argument. Yet Huntington's primary and only knowledge interest became clarified. He was not interested in civilizations but in international politics. This disinterest in the history of civilizations became illusory in the fall and winter of 1993 when Huntington and his critics exchanged views about his main thesis in successive issues of Foreign Affairs. It became obvious that Huntington has a fundamentalist understanding of Western civilization without knowing what constitutes the West and its civilization. He introduced civilization as a new interpretive code because the one he had used for most of his adult professional life—namely the Cold War—had gone out of business. Huntington's essay is a symptom of the vacuum that the end of the Cold War and the collapse of state socialism in Eastern Europe in 1989 and of the Soviet Union in 1991 had created for American political scientists in international relations and comparative politics. The global order which had governed their thinking since World War II and which their thinking had helped to stabilize had to be refashioned. Huntington himself admitted as much when he responded to his critics in 1993 and wrote, 'For 40 years students and practitioners of international relations thought and acted in terms of a highly simplified but very useful picture of world affairs: the Cold War paradigm.' Let me add that the Western Left has not quite digested the impact of 1989 either. It still tries to figure out how to recuperate from the collapse of its world view. In that sense, hegemonic and counterhegemonic intellectuals became ideologically homeless in 1989. Huntington came to the rescue of the establishment intelligentsia after Francis Fukuyama's prediction about the end of history. In his famous essay from 1989, he did not materialize, and all kinds of events demanded a less euphemistic interpretation. Huntington's antiprediction of a clash of civilizations sounded to many so refreshingly familiar that they felt ideologically at home again. Though Huntington and his fellow political scientists had never been particularly interested in the grand narratives of cultural meaning, they suddenly became specialists in the history of civilizations. Yet he admitted in an almost pathetic way how desperate they all were. He entitled his response: If Not Civilizations, What? (Huntington 1993b, 86). Whether the

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BJOAF Bd 23 1999
Kosovo crisis of 1998/99 has cleared the ideological air will become apparent in the near future. The reality of NATO planes bombing Orthodox Christian Serbia with the intention of defending Muslim Kosovars certainly undermined Huntington’s main argument. The German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer made that point in an interview with the German weekly Die Zeit (April 15 1999) He said at the present the rejection of Huntington’s theses on the clash of civilizations occurs in Kosovo. The so called Christian Occident fights there for the human rights of an Islamic people.

When Huntington first introduced the theme of civilization I became intrigued by the fact that a dictionary catalogue of banal observations could attract so much public attention. This is what he had to say and what made him famous.

Civilizations are differentiated from each other by history, language, culture, tradition, and most important religion. The people of different civilizations have different views on the relations between God and man, the individual and the group, the citizen and the state, parents and children, husband and wife, as well as differing views on the relative importance of rights, and responsibilities, liberty and authority, equality and hierarchy. These differences are the product of centuries. They will not soon disappear. (Huntington 1993a 25)

Huntington’s civilizations are formal shells without substantive meaning claims Why the civilizations came into historical being and survived for centuries he does not explore nor is apparent why they should make war on each other. His actual list of civilizations is Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic, Orthodox, Latin American and possibly African turns the scheme into an even more arbitrary historical order that could be easily enlarged or reduced. Huntington’s order and history of civilizations resembles the kind of descriptive positivism that has characterized the conventional textbook approach to civilization history in Western education. The civilizations that he is lining up for the clashes of the future are devoid of any creative energy that would connect the symbolic narratives of meaning with the experiences of the living. He never asks the question whether the conceptual constructs he is using to identify a civilization refer to any experiential reality of concrete human beings. For ages people seem to have been born into these civilizational cages and behaved according to the pre scriptive codes that came with them. There is a kind of perennial fatedness connected with Huntington’s history of civilizations despite the fact that all of them have undergone radical transformations during the last 150 years.

Huntington’s vision of civilization limits the range of human agency. Humans can do nothing about their future. In Huntington’s reading of history the meta narratives of civilizations have scripted fault lines of confrontation which we cannot escape. They will always be there and violently crack open again and again. Destiny is at the core of history. For Huntington civilizations are fixed entities that organize humankind from some arbitrary point in history until an apocalyptic end. Reading Huntington’s opinions of history I am sometimes struck by the similarity to Machiavelli. In his famous treatise The Prince (1513) the Florentine master thinker uses the symbol fortuna for history to express a widely shared understanding that history is but a gamble about which no certain predictions can be made. History is for most people beyond reason. Machiavelli had two answers to this generally shared impression.

(1) I compare fortuna [fortuna] to one of those dangerous rivers that when they become enraged flood the plains, destroy trees and buildings move earth from one place and deposit it in another. Everyone flees before it, everyone gives way to its thrust without being able to halt it in any way. But this does not mean that when the river is not in flood men are unable to take precautions by means of dykes and dams so that when it rises next time it will either not overflow its banks or if it does its force will not be so uncontrolled or damaging (Machiavelli 1988 p 85). (2) I certainly think that it is better to be impetuous than cautious because fortuna [fortuna] is a woman and if you want to control her it is necessary to treat her roughly. And it is clear that she is more inclined to yield to men who are impetuous than to those who are calculating. Since fortuna [fortuna] is a woman she is always well disposed towards young men because they are less cautious and more aggressive and treat her more boldly. (Machiavelli 1988 87)

Machiavelli’s engagement with fate however is not dated at all whatever one may think of his metaphors. As Roger Masters recently suggested one is borrowed from civil engineering. The passage alludes to a cooperation between Machiavelli and Leonardo da Vinci to reroute the Arno river which occasionally has the habit of flooding the city of Florence (see Masters 1996). Machiavelli leaves space for creative politics where Huntington sees nothing but civilizational scripted responses. In that regard this infamous 16th century Italian political thinker is open to the diversity of the world. Machiavelli hasn’t preordained its performance. He sounds almost post modern despite his pre modern posture.

Huntington has predetermined the world. He is quite certain that civilizations anchor people in behavioral codes that do not allow for much variation. That is why he thinks that civilizations will wage at each other’s throats. Well maybe not civilizations as a whole but vicarious subgroups within these civilizational settings. Still I do not quite understand how these killer regimes should emerge from within the various civilizations and take them to war. Huntington simply assumes that it will happen. For him people are fixed in their ethnic civilizational identities and therefore dislike others. According to Huntington’s script Western Europeans or Americans will sooner or later have to go against Confucian, Islamic, or Japanese people for no other reason than that they are different. I find this thesis so utterly unbelievable that I would almost base my prediction about the improbability of a clash of civilizations on it. Yet clashes will occur but for different reasons. Before I develop this point any further let me mention race as another disturbing feature of Huntington’s book.
The political scientist Huntington accepts the discourse of race as if nothing has happened in that area of critical thinking over the last 20 years or since the end of WWII (see Hannaford 1996) He writes in the book

A significant correspondence exists between the division of people by cultural characteristics into civilizations and their division by physical characteristics into races. Yet civilization and race are not identical. People of the same race can be deeply divided by civilization. People of different races may be united by civilization. In particular the great missionary religions Christianity and Islam encompass societies from a variety of races. The crucial distinction among human groups concern their values, beliefs, institutions, and social structures not their physical size, head shapes, and skin colors (Huntington 1996:42).

This passage reflects the intellectual boundaries of Huntington’s thinking. He first recognizes race as a natural marker of difference that corresponds with cultural diversity and then emphasizes in the same paragraph the unnatural civilizing mentalities and institutional structures. On the surface it appears as if he can not make up his mind. Yet the problem goes further than that: On one level he believes in racial difference and accepts the naturalization of the cultural construction of race. On another level he cannot quite figure out why the great spiritual movements of humankind are trans-racial. Since he has only a mechanical understanding of spirituality he does not grasp that all spiritual meaning transcends physical qualities. Yet let me return to the main argument about the probability of civilizational clashes.

The regimes of terror in the 20th century confirm that death regimes may emerge within all the civilizations on Huntington’s roster. Yet these death regimes should not be identified with the civilizations. Hitler’s Third Reich was not the epitome of Western and Pol Pot’s regime was not the essence of any traditional Asian civilization. These regimes were political projects of their own, utilizing cultural features from the civilizations in which they emerged. Whatever these regimes orchestrated was not a manifestation of the respective civilization. Neither the Jewish Holocaust nor Pol Pot’s killing fields affirmed any traditional civilization. Moreover, these regimes of terror operated within their own civilizational orbit. They did not launch transcontinental clashes of civilization a la Huntington. Ironically only Imperial Japan’s invasion of the Asian mainland from 1931 to 1945 comes close to Huntington’s clash course of history. Yet whether this episode of Japanese imperialism was the manifestation of Japanese civilization as Huntington sees it I do not know. In his views the conflict with the Western powers defines the center of the war. How can one make sense of this peculiar fixation? Let me offer a tentative explanation for Huntington’s grand strategy.

After the collapse of state socialism 1989/91 in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union no major ideological discourse was available to legitimate power politics. The rhetoric of revolution which had been part of the landscape since 1917 (Bolshevik revolution in Russia) 1922 (Fascist revolution in Italy) 1933 (Nazi revolution in Germany) 1949 (Communist revolution in China) 1959 (Cuban revolution) had been discredited. Neither anti-Communism nor anti-Fascism nor the various anti-postcolonial projects of meaning had succeeded in replacing the Cold War discourse. With the collapse of Fascism and Communism and the virtual end of old-fashioned colonialism only people with profound tunnel vision could continue to see the world from these ideological perspectives. Admittedly there are a lot of people who suffer from ideological tunnel vision and refuse to see the world with their own eyes. As Plato showed in the Parable of the Cave in many societies it may not be a popular thing to do. You may get hurt and lose your life. One has to give Huntington at least some credit for coming out of his Cold War tunnel and looking for new illumination. However he simply used the discourse of civilization to speak now on a global level about power politics. Why he found that necessary I do not quite understand. After all most of the people who are in power in Asia and invoke Asian values do not do so because they are guided by these values in spelling out a vision of the good life for the majority of people in their societies. They are interested in power in the same way Huntington is.

When the Chinese President Jiang Zemin visited in 1997 the USA and encountered on all stops of his trip beginning in Honolulu, where he swam for an hour in the waters off Waikiki beach in order to show his people back home how strong he really was in the foreign sea only to be overruled by domestic advisors who kept this footage off Chinese TV because it was after all the foreign sea in which he swam (New York Times, October 28, 1997) – criticism concerning the regime’s treatment of dissidents especially the Tiananmen Square students. His response was always that a country with a population of 1.2 billion could not afford a political disturbance like the Tiananmen Square protest culture. As he said during the unusual press conference with President Clinton (October 29, 1997).

The Communist Party of China and the Chinese Government have long drawn the correct conclusion on this political disturbance. And facts have proved that if a country with an over 1.2 billion population does not enjoy social and political stability it cannot possibly have the situation of reform and opening up that we are having today. (New York Times, October 30, 1997)

This view has nothing to do with Asian values. It is straight power talk that every politician in the world would like to use. Machiavelli would certainly have understood this Machiavellian speech. Jiang Zemin was speaking to the truth of the dissidents back home. He made no apologies and did not invoke Asian values. This battle cry of politicians who resent being exposed to the criticism of the public sphere. President Clinton was right when he said to Jiang Zemin on this issue we believe the policy of the government is on the wrong side of history (New York Times, October 30, 1999).

The best response to this smokescreen of power came from Aung San Suu Kyi the Burmese dissident and Nobel Peace Prize opponent of the junta of generals.
She expressed her anger about the Asian values argument in an interview with the German news magazine Der Spiegel (September 29, 1997).

Democracy is rooted in human values. Each one of us wants to be recognized as a valuable and dignified individual. The foundations of democracy are human rights and they are based on human nature. That's a universal concept. It neither belongs to the West or the East nor the North or the South.

She acknowledged why some leaders insist on Asian values. The argument very often means that democracy is foreign to Asia since it emerged in the West. But is it possible to keep Burmese Malaysians or Thais from buying TV sets only because they were not invented in Asia? Aung San Suu Kyi's eloquent response can be easily transferred to other Asian societies. Her response does not express contempt for Asia and uncritical admiration of the West. On the contrary, she wants to remind people in all societies and thereby civilizations that they are bound together by common aspirations. The West has no primacy in the understanding of these values and has certainly demonstrated on many occasions how to trample on them. The West has been its own worst enemy when it comes to the application of these values at home and abroad.

Aung San Suu Kyi's affinity toward universal instead of Asian values resembles the struggle of dissidents in Eastern Europe up to the end of 1989. The Eastern European dissidents were not fighting for European or Western values – even if they frequently made comments of that nature to get rhetorical protection from Western Europe and the USA. The dissidents were fighting for the affirmation of their own human dignity which they tried to actualize in a parallel polis: an alternative civil society juxtaposed to the official society of the state socialist regime. (The late Vaclav Benda coined the phrase parallel polis (Benda 1988)).

The dissidents were living with the clear understanding that possibly they would never experience in their lifetime a change in the official arrangement of the state socialist world. The solidarity of the world they were living in was also certified by the behavior of the West including or especially Western intellectuals who showed not much interest in the Eastern European situation and the cause of the dissidents. The prospects of having to live for the foreseeable future in a society based on state socialist values did not however lead them to the kind of power fatalism Huntington exemplifies. On the one hand, they existed in the official society and on the other hand, they lived in truth in the parallel polis. Aung San Suu Kyi found some middle ground for her life as a rebel. She does not live in an underground parallel polis but in exile within the official society.

Following the events in Indonesia from 1997 to 1999, it became quite obvious that the attempts of the Suharto regime to use the Asian values discourse for the purpose of silencing domestic critics found no positive resonance in society. On the contrary, the more authoritarian the actualization of Asian values became, the deeper the resentment grew within an incipient Indonesian civil society. The response against the authoritarian regime followed historical patterns that had revealed themselves over the last two hundred years in Western and non-Western societies, e.g., frequently in Chinese society since the revolution of 1911. In the Indonesian case, the drama of politics was not only spearheaded by students. Islamic领导者 like Abdurrahman Wahid, the chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama with 35 million members, the largest Muslim organization, did not only positively comment on the events but also participated in the process of political transformation. And a potential candidate for the office of president himself. Being a moderate Muslim leader, he has consistently supported the process of democratization. Whatever impact the electoral process of 1999 may have on the democratization of Indonesian politics, the dynamics of transformation will not be contained in a traditional Asian tutelary state. In the future, no Indonesian political regime will be capable of managing Indonesia without recognizing the fact that Indonesian civil society has come of political age (see Hakim 1996). This contemporary politicization of civil society resembles the processes by which Western societies overcame the need for authoritarian regimes during the last two hundred years. When watching the protracted process of the Indonesian political transformation in 1999, it is important to remember how long it took (West) Germany to join the club of democratic societies in 1949. That was one year after the Dutch finally agreed to stop all military action against the anti-colonial republic of Indonesia. The political dynamic which is underway today in Indonesia cannot be contained anymore by an authoritarian state. In the communist societies which regulated the economy according to non-market principles, the tutelage became self-destructive for the state when it could not deliver goods and services. Indonesia demands will be made by the students and the emerging middle classes for the freedom from interference by the state in society and the economy. These demands will slowly lead to the politicization of civil society – just as it happened in the authoritarian societies of Western Europe in the 19th century.

The North Korean society may represent at this time one of the scarcest scenarios in the world for the Korean peninsula itself but also for the USA, China, and Japan. It can easily lead to one of the ugliest and bloodiest clashes in the late 20th or early 21st century. Yet this scenario has not much to do with Huntington's expectations either. Here a society of 23.5 million is or was constructed in a specific ideological frame which has as much to do with Asian values as communist Albania had to do with Western values. Both societies were imagined by megalomaniac ideologues who had lost contact with reality yet found for a few decades. Soviet and Chinese regimes to bankroll them. Once these supportive regimes went out of business or had second thoughts, the client societies were on their own. Albania descended into chaos and anarchy. Having a non-productive economy but plenty of food aid from the outside world and financial remittances from North Koreans, living in Japan, North Korea still manages to feed its party cadres and huge army while hundreds of thousands of ordinary people are starving or dying. I do not expect that the North Koreans will start a war even though their leaders may be misguided enough to do just that. I rather anticipate for North Korea a worse scenario than Albania and terrible
consequences for the 45.5 million people of South Korea. I am not telling this story for the sake of the Koreans. I find the Korean case is as good as all the other probable cases of macro violence in order to counter Huntington's argument. There is no civilizational clash scenario a la Huntington present in the current Korean configuration but an ideological megalomania potentially running amuck against South Koreans first Americans and Japanese next and then by necessity China.

It should have become obvious that I have a major problem with Huntington's thesis about the upcoming clashes of civilizations. I do not think civilizations clash people who are motivated legitimated and organized by political regimes do. These clashes are mostly within societies or if they move outside of the borders of a society they take place within a civilization in the general sense of the word. Rarely have we encountered in the 20th century civilizational confrontations of the kind Huntington is anticipating in his book such as civilizations violently crossing boundaries. The ideological empires of the 20th century are no exception. These empires did not have much to do with the civilizational identity retention and promotion Huntington is talking about. These empires of communist or fascist persuasion were in the business of their own identity production. In that sense yet not in the sense of Huntington's traditional civilizations one can speak of new civilizations trying to establish themselves. Most of the violent acts they performed were carried out within the boundaries of the traditional civilizations they wanted to overcome and replace. Soviet communism and national socialism were good examples for that phenomenon. Two of these new civilizations, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, already belong to the rubble of history Communist China still exists as a new civilization at least nominally though many observers inside and outside of China claim that old patterns of meaning Confucianism Taoism Buddhism and animism have never been completely destroyed and are reasserting themselves in extraordinary ways. I am not so sure about these claims. They may reflect the wishful thinking of nostalgia. The observers may hope for a return of these patterns of meaning since a post Maoist future without meaning is for them an even worse nightmare. It hints at grand scenarios of chaos and anarchy that will be governed and exploited by legitimate and criminal warlords. According to Jiwai Ci and his book "Dialectics of the Chinese Revolution" we may have to come to terms with a Chinese future at the end of the Chinese century of civil wars and revolutions that will be characterized by nothing but the nihilism of meaning the pursuit of profits and the hedonism of consumption. For Jiwai Ci the

dignity Marxism imparts to human beings in effect turns them into gods who then find the work of their human selves wanting. And they then become nihilistic and cynical unable to keep their godlike idealism or ever again to return to their human all too human selves which were devout of great purposes but which were also spared great despair (Jiwai Ci 1994: 231).

For Jiwai Ci China has exhausted its indigenous cultural meaning narratives and the Western ones it tried out when the indigenous ones failed. China cannot according to this exited Chinese intellectual return to its pasts. When I am looking at the world in 1999 I do not see Huntington's scenarios. The clashes of civilizations he predicts depend on the solid affirmation of the core features of them and the adherence of the people to let these core features define and structure their lives. I do not notice affirmation or adherence in China or the West. And I would not consider the violent enforcement attempts of the strict constructionist Muslims in Afghanistan Algeria or Egypt successful either. The more violence they use the more they prove how unsuccessful they really are in convincing their followers. Huntington has not completely understood Max Weber's reading of modernity. When Max Weber was writing at the beginning of this century about the disenchantment of the world its growing secularization the retreat of religion from center stage of personal and social life and the emergence of occidental rationalism as switchboard for all kinds of steering functions in the complex industrial world he was living in he was still primarily speaking about the Western world. Yet the tendencies he described then have since become global and are not longer limited to the West. The West has become a province in the disenchanted post industrial world we are all living in.

Does all of this mean that Fukuyama is right after all and that humans as inhabitants of the global village will no longer need any meaning? Certainly not. Yet the answer Huntington gives is not much better. He talks about a global religious resurgence (Huntington 1996: 97) He quotes at length the French political scientist Gilles Kepel who reported a few years ago the membership growth in certain churches, mosques and synagogues. Kepel's book title "The Revenge of God" and the subtitle "The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity and Judaism in the Modern World" are used by Huntington to prove that a worldwide insurrectionist movement is underway against modernity. Huntington writes the religious resurgence throughout the world is a reaction against secular rationalism 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 left untended by state bureaucrats (Huntington 1996: 981).

Though all these reactions and trends may actually happen it does not follow that modernity is in recess. What Huntington is describing resembles the conservative revolution of mentality that characterized the German landscape before the 19th and after WWI when segments of the German traditional elites felt threatened by modernity. This climate of conservative resurgence contributed to the slow emergence and political success of the Nazi movement. It did not cause it. It simply helped it along by feeding all kinds of reactionary tendencies. Yet when the Nazis finally came to power they applied modernity in the building of the German Autobahn the VW Beetle the Jet engine the gas chambers and others. The most retrograde political movement made use of the most modern accomplish
ments of technology and science. Modernity did not produce the Nazis. It be
longed to the features of the world in which the Nazis were emerging as a political
movement of resentment and hate. This primacy of a political regime in the
creation of a clash scenario cannot be emphasized enough. Let me therefore con-
clude with a few comments about the politics I prefer.

I always return to the ancient Greeks when I talk about my preferred under-
standing of politics. In the 5th and 4th century B.C. the Greeks developed not only
unusual participatory structures for over ten percent of the resident population.
They also produced the writers and philosophers who interpreted this exceptional
process. Participatory structures of governance and intellectual self-interpreta-
tion turned the Greek *polis* into the paradigmatic polity generations of rulers loved
to hate. Returning to the ancient Greeks, therefore, is not an atavistic enterprise
but an attempt to understand the existential and experiential conditions under
which politics as an unnatural activity came into being. Monarchy is a much more
natural regime of governance for a society because it freezes natural and social ineq-
ualities into a hierarchical order. The Greek invention of politics focuses on the free
agent who is able to speak and articulate his views (and the male exclusivity of the
*polis* citizenry connects this type of regime with other traditional societies). He
articulates his views in free assembly and produces through speech the drama of the
public realm which became terminated by Alexander the Great around 336 B.C. It has
never been completely recovered within the modern nation state. The reinvention of
politics as the empowerment of human agency in society is the great task for the future.
This is not a Western game; it is a universal project. The West has rightly lost all privileges in this regard. Five hundred years of Western history have shown the Western limitations and delegitimized all its special
truth claims. At the end of the 20th century we find ourselves confronted with the
challenge to think of politics as a saving game in all societies— if we want to a
void Fukuyama or Huntington's apocalyptic end games.

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