

THE CLASH AT 25

Huntington's Legacy

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Samuel Huntington was not right about everything. Rather, his greatness lay in his ability to conceptualize big ideas in a wide variety of fields.

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Since Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* has been contrasted with my own *End of History* in countless introductory International Relations classes over the past two decades, I might as well begin by tackling at the outset the issue of how we're doing *vis-à-vis* one another. At the moment, it looks like Huntington is winning.

The world today is not converging around liberal democratic government, as it seemed to be for more than a generation. The Third Wave of democratization that Huntington himself observed progressed in the period from the mid-1970s to the mid-2000s from about 35 electoral states to perhaps 115 by 2008. But since then the wave has gone into reverse, what Larry Diamond has labeled a democratic recession.^[1] Not only has the number of democracies declined somewhat, but important qualitative changes have taken place. Big authoritarian powers like Russia and China have grown self-confident and aggressive. Meanwhile, existing liberal democracies have lost much of their appeal after the financial crises in America and the Eurozone during the 2000s, and are suffering from populist uprisings that threaten the liberal pillar of their political systems.

In place of the Left-Right ideological split defined largely by issues revolving around the relative economic power of capital and labor in an industrialized setting that characterized 20th-century politics, we now have a political spectrum organized increasingly around identity issues, many of which are defined more by culture than by economics narrowly construed. This shift is not good for the health of liberal democracy,

and the number one exemplar of this dysfunction is the United States, where the rise of Donald Trump has posed a serious threat to America's check-and-balance institutions. The phenomenon of rising populist nationalism is one that I have explored previously in this journal,^[2] and at much greater length in my most recent book *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*.

Huntington was very prescient in his depiction of "Davos Man," the cosmopolitan creature unmoored from strong attachments to any particular place, loyal primarily to his own self-interest. Davos Man has now become the target of populist rage, as the elites who constructed our globalized world are pilloried for being out of touch with the concerns of the working class. Huntington also foresaw the rise of immigration as one of the chief issues driving populism and the fears that mass migration has stoked about cultural change. Indeed, Carlos Lozada of the *Washington Post* has labeled Huntington as a prophet of the Trump era.^[3]

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What no one in the current debate can say is whether the current democratic recession will turn into a full-blown depression, marking a more fundamental shift in global politics toward some alternative regime type, or whether it is more like a stock market correction. The causes of the current recession in Western countries are reasonably clear: Populism has been driven by the unequal effects of globalization, as well as a cultural revolt against the large numbers of migrants moving across international borders and challenging traditional notions of national identity.

There are a number of reasons, however, to wonder if these forces will be strong enough to eventually overcome the factors driving the world toward greater convergence in economic and political institutions, or lead to serious geopolitical conflict on a scale matching that of the early 20th century. Neither the China model nor the emerging populist-nationalist one represented by Russia, Turkey, or Hungary will likely be sustainable economically or politically over an extended period. On the other hand, democracies have mechanisms in place for correcting mistakes, and a big test of American democracy will occur in November when Americans get to vote on whether they approve of the presidency of Donald Trump. Moreover, the rural, less-educated parts of the

population that are the core of populist support are, in countries experiencing economic growth, in long-term decline. At this point, however, such assertions amount to no more than speculation.

Culture Matters

Let me turn then to a more specific analysis of Huntington's argument, looking back at a review of the *Clash* I did for the *Wall Street Journal* back in 1996.

There is a common theme that runs through all of Huntington's later works, which includes not just *The Clash of Civilizations* but also *Who Are We?* (2004), *Culture Matters* (a volume published in 2001 and co-edited by Lawrence Harrison, to which I contributed), *Many Globalizations* (edited with Peter L. Berger), and even his book *The Third Wave* (1991). That theme is culture. Huntington argued that people's political behavior are heavily shaped by culture, and that these culturally defined preferences are persistent in the face of socio-economic modernization and will ultimately trump rational self-interest as defined by modern economics.

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His last book, *Who Are We?*, for example, focused on American identity and argued that the success of the United States as a nation depended heavily on the fact that North America was settled by what he labeled "Anglo-Protestants":

Would America be the America it is today if in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it had been settled not by British Protestants but by French, Spanish, or Portuguese Catholics? The answer is no. It would not be America; it would be Quebec, Mexico, or Brazil.^[4]

The Third Wave chronicled the rise of liberal democracies around the world following the fall of the Berlin Wall. But a cultural argument was embedded here as well: According to Huntington, the democratic wave was not based on broad acceptance of a set of universal values around democracy, but rather on the fact that the new democracies in Latin America and Europe had a Christian—indeed, often a Catholic—cultural background. What had changed, according to Huntington, was the Catholic Church's reconciliation with modern democracy after Vatican II, which then permitted countries from Hungary and Poland to Argentina and Brazil to accept democracy as a form of government.

As I said at the time in reviews of his books, Huntington is indubitably right in his general assertion that culture matters. My own book *Trust* explained how shared culture was the basis for high levels of social trust in particular countries and contributed greatly to their economic success. Huntington was accused after the publication of *Who Are We?* of being an anti-immigrant racist, but it seems to me that his statement quoted above is quite correct: The “Anglo-Protestant” settlers of North America contributed to the country’s success not because of their ethnicity, but because of the cultural values they carried, including the Protestant work ethic, belief in a Lockean individualism, distrust of concentrated state authority, and other values. What I said at the time in defense of continued immigration into the United States, however, was that these cultural values had become deracinated from their particular ethnic roots and had become a possession of all Americans. But the cultural proclivity still matters.

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Beyond this broad affirmation of the durability of culture as a determinant of political behavior, however, there are many problems with Huntington’s argument in the *Clash*. Huntington argues specifically that culture is ultimately rooted in religion, and that broad religious affiliations rather than more specific identities will structure future world order. Both of these assertions are highly problematic.

Huntington was way out ahead of most observers when he noted the return of religion as a rising force in modern politics: not just in the Middle East, but in India, where the Hindu BJP is now the ruling party; in Latin America, much of which has gone Protestant in recent years; and, indeed, in the United States, where religious conservatives have played a growing political role. Were he still alive, he might also point to the phenomenon of militant Buddhism in countries from Sri Lanka to Myanmar.

But assertions of identity in the contemporary world are based on many other types of group solidarity, of which religion is only one. For example, socioeconomic modernization has led to the rise of a global women’s movement that seeks both political and social rights for women. This movement is powerful not just in Europe and North America, but has taken root in the conservative countries of the Gulf. It will be an important counterweight to conservative Islam in both Iran and Saudi Arabia, two countries in which women graduating from universities outnumber men. Similarly, old-fashioned nationalism has

reappeared in many places. Japan, Korea, and China have been at each other's throats in recent years over their historical legacies; the fact that they belong to a common Confucian civilization is of no consequence to contemporary politics. (Huntington tried to get around this problem by arguing that Japan belonged to its own separate civilization; it is much more parsimonious to say that it is following its own view of national interest.) Religion may lie in the background of the new populist movements in Europe and the United States, but they are powered by plenty of old-fashioned nationalism as well, as well as factors like ethnicity, race, economic inequality, and shared historical memory.

Huntington made some very specific assertions about the nature of future global order that are easy to forget at this juncture. He didn't say simply that cultural groups would clash, but rather that the old ideological divisions would give way to a world order based on the six or seven big religiously grounded civilizations. There would be more solidarity within these civilizational units than across civilizational boundaries, to the point where civilizations would start behaving like imperial 19th-century states, forming alliances against one another.

As I argued when the *Clash* first appeared, the only culture with identifiable numbers of people who think in such civilizational terms is the world of Islam, in which the idea of a Muslim *umma*, or global community of believers, still has some traction. Osama bin Laden certainly believed that he was fighting Christendom on behalf of Islam. People in the West, East Asia, Latin America, or sub-Saharan Africa tend not think in these terms: Apart from a handful of populists like Pat Buchanan, no one in the West still sees it as "Christendom," as opposed to a civilization built around liberal Enlightenment values. The world of Islam itself is hugely divided today: The fanatics of the Islamic State do not believe that Shi'a are genuine Muslims, and have been busy trying to kill as many of them as possible. The greater Middle East is divided today between the two big branches of Islam backed by nation-states, Saudi Arabia and Iran; so great are the internal divisions within the region, ethnic and tribal as well as sectarian, that Afghanistan, Somalia, Syria, Libya, and Yemen have not even been able to hold together as countries. Nor does the fact that Ukraine, Russia, and Georgia all share a common Orthodox background diminish the intensity of the political conflicts between them.

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Identity, Not Culture

Identity is a much broader and more flexible concept with which to understand contemporary politics rather than religiously based culture or civilizations. Identity is the modern concept that arises out of the belief that one has a hidden inner self whose dignity is at best being ignored or at worst being disparaged by the surrounding society. Identity politics revolves around demands not for materials goods or resources, but for recognition of the dignity of one's ethnicity, religion, nation, or even one's unique characteristics as an individual. Viewed in this light, both nationalism and Islamism—that is, politicized Islam—can be seen as different manifestations of identity. The Serb nationalists in 1914 resented the fact that the world did not recognize the Serbs of the Austro-Hungarian Empire; anger at this fact is what led Gavrilo Princip to assassinate Archduke Franz Ferdinand. Similarly, Osama bin Laden as a teenager came to his parents with tears in his eyes after watching a news broadcast of the mistreatment of Palestinians; striking back at the United States on September 11 was a way of forcing it to recognize that Muslims were people with agency and thus dignity.

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Indeed, if we unpack the psychology of identity, we see that much of what is labeled religious extremism is actually not driven by religious belief *per se*, if by that one means personal piety and individual commitment to a particular doctrine. Many of the young European Muslims who left the countries of their birth to fight for the Islamic State in Syria were trapped between two cultures, the traditional one defined by the piety of their parents, and the secular Western one in which they were brought up. This identity confusion could easily be answered by a radical Islamist who presented an ideology that answered the question, “Who am I?”, and connected that individual to a larger community of Muslims around the world.

In a less violent manner, many of the Muslim women who have taken to wearing the *hijab* are doing so not because they have suddenly become so much more pious; the hijab rather is a marker of identity that tells those around them that they are proud and unafraid to be seen as Muslim. In this respect, religion simply becomes a useful device by which ambitious politicians can mobilize political support, much like European politicians of the 19th century (and some in the present day) used national identity as a means of mobilizing their followers.

Seeing the same phenomena through an identity lens rather than through the lens of religiously based culture better conforms to today's realities. Huntington argued that civilizations were becoming more cohesive at the expense of nations; social integration was happening, but at a transnational cultural level. In my view, something of the opposite is true: Assertions of identity tend to fracture societies into smaller and smaller identity groups. We've already noted this happening in the Muslim world, where different Muslim factions have been in effect excommunicating one another rather than working together. Although the new populist nationalists in Russia, Poland, Hungary, and other parts of Europe have tried to build solidarity with one another, they run up against the fact that their national interests often are in conflict, and that in some cases they have put themselves in conflict with their own national minorities.

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One of the most salient cases of assertions of identity leading not to civilizational solidarity but to endless fractionalization is the United States. Identity politics took hold in the United States in the wake of the social movements of the 1960s, in which African-Americans, women, the disabled, indigenous Americans, gays, and lesbians all came to feel that they had experienced discrimination and marginalization in distinctive ways. The different "lived experiences" of each group led some to assert that those who were not members of the group could not even begin to sympathize with its struggles. There was the constant emergence of new identities: not just gays and lesbians, but transgender and intersex people; "intersectionality" appeared with the realization that overlapping categories of marginalization led to the creation of entirely new identities. In both the United States and Europe, the Left which had been built during the first part of the 20th century around working class solidarity came to embrace these new identity groups, even though this tended to alienate older working class voters.

The rise of identity politics on the Left has stimulated and legitimated new assertions of identity on the Right. Donald Trump has received support for being politically incorrect, that is, for not respecting the identity niceties that characterize contemporary American political discourse. In doing so he has greatly abetted the rise of white nationalists and the alt-right, which see themselves as persecuted and marginalized minorities in much the same way as the leftwing identity groups. The Trumpist right in the United States today includes many

Christian evangelicals, but it would not be accurate to say that the Trump phenomenon is driven primarily by religion. Many of his voters would like to preserve a traditional concept of American national identity that was partly defined by Christianity, but also by ethnicity and conservative social values more generally. None of this squares, of course, with the sort of liberal civic identity that America had slowly built for itself in the wake of the Civil War.

Identity, as opposed to Huntington's concept of culture, is a better descriptor of today's politics because it is both socially constructed and contestable, as today's debates over American national identity illustrate. Huntington's cultures are, by contrast, fixed and nearly impossible to change. Contrary to the views of many nationalists and religious partisans, identities are neither biologically rooted nor of ancient provenance. Nationalism in the modern sense did not exist in Europe prior to the French Revolution; the Islam of Osama bin Laden or Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi does not conform to any of the major traditional schools of Islamic jurisprudence. Contemporary identities based on concepts of nation or religion were created by political actors for specific purposes, and can be displaced by other identities as the outcome of a political struggle.

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So while culture does matter, Huntington's theory really does not fit the current reality in many ways. Western democracies are at war with themselves internally over national identity; there is a slipping consensus that they fit into a broad category like "the West." When Donald Trump spoke of "the West" in a speech in Poland in 2017, his West was a different one from the West of President Obama. Similarly, in other parts of the world, civilizational fractures are just one among many that are dividing people politically. The only countervailing forces are strong states like the ones governing China and Russia, not transnational entities based on shared cultural values.

Universal Values

The most important issue that Huntington raises in the *Clash* and related writings is one that for the moment remains a contested assertion, which has to do with the question of universal values. Huntington did not believe that universal values exist. Each of the

world's big civilizations, according to him, was built around a certain set of shared values whose roots lie in a complex historical past, and which were ultimately incommensurate with one another.

In particular, Huntington argued that there were no universal values underlying liberal democracy. The latter sprang from Western experience and was very much rooted in Europe's Christian past. There is thus no particular reason to think that liberal democracy will spread and take root in other, culturally different parts of the world. To the extent that democracy has spread to places like Japan or South Korea, it is the result of American political, military, and economic power; but should that power decline relative to that of other civilizations, the appeal of democratic ideas will diminish with it.

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This is a serious argument. George W. Bush in his second inaugural address spoke of democracy as a universal value that was not dependent for its success on certain prior cultural values. This was obviously untrue in the short-run cases where his Administration sought to create functioning liberal democracies, Afghanistan and Iraq. But this belief in democratic universalism also failed to acknowledge the West's own history. Democratic institutions have been around for only the past couple hundred years and did not become fully established even in many parts of the West until well into the 20th century. Other forms of government were deemed legitimate for many centuries in Europe and continue to receive support in other parts of the world. The moral equality of all human beings is not something universally accepted by all cultural systems, and is explicitly denied in certain ones.

To the extent that one can maintain an argument for the universalism of a certain set of values, it has to be linked to a broader historical process. If we step back and take a macroscopic view of human history, we see that there has been a long-term evolution of human institutions through a variety of stages, from band-level hunter-gatherer groups to tribal forms of organization, then to settled agrarian societies with state-level political institutions, and then to large scale urban-industrial societies with highly complex state-level governance. What is remarkable about this history is that these different stages occurred around the world in varying geographical, climactic, and cultural conditions.

For example, patrilineal segmentary societies with very similar forms of social organization appeared across a variety of places, from China to India to the Middle East to the Germanic tribes that overran the Roman Empire. These were gradually displaced in most parts of the world by state-level institutions, and then by societies that increasingly found it necessary to defend property rights if they were to remain economically viable in the long run. The emergence of modern China does not violate this pattern: Chinese society in many ways looks very similar today to that of earlier modernizers in being urban, industrial, with social hierarchies built around education and acquired skills, in which women are slowly displacing men in an increasingly service-based economy. As noted above, Saudi Arabia and Iran are educating large numbers of women, and the latter are forming the leading edge of a grassroots movement for liberalization in their respective societies. Where these countries continue to diverge is their political systems.

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Modernization, in other words, is a coherent process that in certain respects is not culturally determined. There are clearly universal forms of social organization that have responded to the functional needs of different societies at similar levels of development.

The long-term unanswered questions posed by Huntington then are: Will deeply rooted cultural values be so durable as to prevent certain societies from ever modernizing; and if they modernize, will they fail to converge in terms of political institutions? The jury is still out on these issues. For many decades, people in the West thought that modernization could only occur on the basis of Western values, but the rise of East Asia has disproved that point of view. We need to be cautious in thinking that certain parts of the world will always remain poor. And if Saudi Arabia, Iran, and China become rich, high-tech societies with large middle classes and highly educated populations, will they still be content to be ruled by poorly educated clerics or Communist party apparatchiks? The possibility that they will not, and that they will demand greater political participation, is the grounds on which one might believe that convergence in regime types remains a possibility.

In one of the panels I took part in memorializing Sam Huntington after his passing away in December 2008, it was notable how many of his students expressed great love and respect for him, both as a scholar and as a person, but then went on to disagree with particular ideas he had

articulated. I was one of them. Like many other great social theorists of the past, his contribution does not necessarily lie in the fact that he was right about everything. Rather, his greatness lay in his ability to conceptualize big ideas in a wide variety of fields, conceptualizations that then served to organize the way that people subsequently thought about and debated them. This was true of the *Clash of Civilizations*, as of most of the rest of his extensive corpus.

▮Diamond, "[Facing Up to the Democratic Recession](#)," *Journal of Democracy* (January 2015).

▮Fukuyama, "[The Populist Surge](#)," *American Interest* (March/April 2018).

▮Lozada, "[Samuel Huntington, A Prophet for the Trump Era](#)," *Washington Post* (July 18, 2017).

▮Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* (Simon and Schuster, 2004), p. 59.

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