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What is This?

THE CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS: A MODEL OF HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT?

Gregory Melleuish

ABSTRACT   The article examines the 'clash of civilizations' theory of history as developed recently by Samuel Huntington and Victor Lee Burke. It argues that this theory attempts to combine an historical sociology that sees states and war as the motors of human history with a notion of civilization as something solid and fixed. It contends that civilizations are fluid and amorphous entities that cannot be treated as states, and that 'the ways of peace' such as cultural exchanges and trade are just as important as war and conflict in any attempt to understand the history of humanity.

KEYWORDS   civilization • conflict • history • identity • states

How is one to understand world history considered as the history of humanity? This is not an easy question to answer, especially given the extraordinary variety of conditions under which human beings live. The reality of cultural diversity would appear to make the task of someone constructing a general history of humanity rather daunting. Yet there is also a great variety in the languages created by human groups, and it is possible to group these languages into families. It has also been the normal practice of historians to group together human units into a number of entities – these include societies, cultures, civilizations and political units such as states – that have things in common, and which effectively become the actors of world history. Human history can then be conceptualized as the interaction among such actors, and these interactions can take a number of forms ranging from peaceful trade and the interchange of ideas to war and extermination. It is clear, however, that when we use a term such as 'the state' we are looking at human entities in a different way from when we use the term 'society'. We assume

that states, as actors, will interact differently than do societies. States interact as political entities conducting diplomacy and war while social interaction can range from intermarriage to the copying of customs, including dress, diet and social practices.

This article is concerned with the explanatory power of the term 'civilization' when it is used to designate an historical actor. Recent books have written about what is termed the 'clash of civilizations', arguing that civilizations can, and do, clash and conflict with each other in much the same way that states interact (Burke, 1997; Huntington, 1996). Is this possible? Are civilizations entities that are capable of clashing or does the power of the term 'civilization' to explain human phenomena for historians rest on something else? Our starting point in such an inquiry must be to address the issue: what is a civilization?

It is extremely difficult to define a civilization exactly. Accepting this difficulty, Fernand Braudel proceeds by running through a history of the word, followed by a consideration of civilizations as geographical areas, societies, economies and ways of thought (Braudel, 1995: 9–23). Michael Mann also admits that 'we can never exactly define what we mean by "civilization"'. He goes on to say that this is why civilizations are usually defined in terms of lists of characteristics, and proceeds to quote from Gordon Childe's list (Mann, 1986: 73–4). Civilizations are difficult to define because they are by nature slippery: not only are they large, amorphous entities but they also change over time, shedding and acquiring not only characteristics but also geographical regions. Once the Middle East was the jewel in the Christian crown, and Spain an important part of Islamic civilization. One must agree with Mann: in the final analysis one is reduced to making lists of characteristics. What constitutes a civilization? One can point to economics, to culture, to ethics, to religion, to language, to artistic style, to social and political structures, aware that in any particular civilization only some of these factors may be significant.

Two contrasting elements emerge from any attempt to characterize civilizations. The first is that they are complex and pluralistic entities that contain a range of possibilities within them that are capable of being developed, even if only by sections of the civilization. The second is that the term 'civilization' is an ideal type, and its purpose is to turn an entity that is difficult to define into something manageable – so that it can be used for purposes of historical analysis. As long as we recognize the limits of our intellectual tools I believe that it is possible to say that there are such things as civilizations, but we should be careful regarding the role that we allocate to civilizations as historical actors. Civilizations are not unified entities, such as states and cultures, nor can political or military power be attributed to them. Rather civilization should be seen as a particular way of understanding the peoples and societies who compose it. I would also argue that the power of civilization as a tool for explaining historical narrative is limited because of the level of abstraction at which it operates.

Consider, for example, the case of European civilization. We can say that, in ideal typical terms, there is such a thing as European civilization. Its origins can be traced to the Carolingian empire and the fusion of the Graeco-Roman heritage, Christianity and Germanic political and social institutions that was capped by the assumption of the imperial role by Charlemagne. It is possible to point to unifying elements within the emerging European civilization, including the use of Latin as the language of high culture (Latin was to be the language of the Hungarian parliament until 1848), the use of the Roman rite and the prevalence of a number of shared political forms, including representative institutions, monarchical kingdoms and urban communes. Robert Bartlett (1993: ch. 1) has argued that from about 1000 AD the members of this Carolingian core began expanding eastwards into Poland and the Baltic, south-eastwards into what became *outre mer*, but also Sicily and Greece, westwards into Ireland and southwards into Moorish Spain. European civilization was expanding but that was a consequence rather than a cause of this military activity.

Equally one should look at the forces that made for diversity and disorder within the European world. We know from Marc Bloch (1965) that feudalism was never universal in Europe, and if Susan Reynolds (1994) is right there may never have been any feudalism, it being the invention of lawyers after the fact. There is also the division in Europe between those who followed the traditional common law and those who were the heirs of Roman law, not to mention the religious fractures caused by the reformation and by linguistic divisions. Thomas Ertman (1997) has recently traced the evolution of the European state which he divides into four types, emphasizing how particular historical forces led them onto differing paths. What links the various components of European civilization is that their political, linguistic, economic and religious features have family resemblances; they are not identical but are like the various members of a family of languages.

The genealogy of the term 'civilization' also provides a clue regarding its mode of understanding human beings and their flourishings. In its initial formulation, from Adam Ferguson through to Guizot, civilization was conceived in terms of the progress of society and its economic development from hunter-gatherer to complex commercial order. Moreover, the liberal theorists who developed this idea of civilization were convinced that commercial society was replacing an earlier social and political order based on war. The progress of civilization therefore was not to be explained in terms of military clashes but as the triumph of a peaceful humanity over its dangerous primitive instincts. This is perhaps best summed up in Benjamin Constant's (1988: 308–28) distinction between ancient and modern liberty, as he argued that modern liberty meant that commerce had replaced war as the dominant way in which human societies interacted with each other. Hence most theorists of civilization have not considered war to be part of civilization. In the 19th and 20th centuries civilization has generally had a normative dimension that

opposes it to war and associates it with commerce, science, technology and intellectual progress. Hence for Gordon Childe (1982) the motor of history in the development of civilizations was the development and diffusion of ideas and technological advances. In other words, civilization conventionally has been linked to the ways of peace and to large human entities that develop goods, technologies and ideas, and then exchange those products with other civilizations.

If the traditional view of civilizations emphasized the ways of peace, how then has it been possible to develop a 'clash of civilizations' model of history? I think that there are three crucial elements of the 'clash of civilizations' view. The first draws on the violent narrative of the 20th century with its history of genocide and ethnic cleansing, and concludes that groups of human beings cannot get on with groups who are different from them in terms of race, religion and culture. The second focuses on the new historical sociology of the past 30 years and its emphasis on the state and war as the motor of human history. This includes the work of sociologists such as Michael Mann (1986) and Charles Tilly (1992). This mode of historical explanation, especially when combined with the idea of the military revolution (Parker, 1996), has borne much fruit, particularly in terms of explaining European state formation. But it does provide a model of historical development that is almost Darwinian in nature as it portrays states seeking to expand and survive by preying on and swallowing up other states. Clearly it also links up with the realist theory of international relations. The third is a tendency to treat civilizations as if they were unified political and cultural entities, that is, states capable of behaving as historical actors in a unified and forceful fashion.

In their recent works Samuel Huntington (1996) and Victor Lee Burke (1997) have attempted to flesh out a clash of civilizations model of history based on these assumptions. Both writers accept that 'human history is the history of civilizations' (Huntington, 1996: 40). What then is meant by the term 'civilization'? They agree that civilizations are coherent and compact entities founded on a common identity and hence capable of behaving in a unified fashion. Huntington wants to make identity the central feature characterizing a civilization, so that civilizations become like culturally homogenous nation-states. In other words he attempts to collapse civilizations into cultures. He claims that 'culture counts, and cultural identity is what is meaningful to most people' before asserting that cultural identities 'at the broadest level are civilization identities' (1996: 20). 'Civilization', he further claims (1996: 43), 'is the broadest cultural entity'. He asserts that civilizations are the 'biggest "we" within which we feel culturally at home as distinguished from all the other "thems" out there'. Yet when it comes to the contemporary world Huntington has problems identifying its civilizations clearly. Papua New Guinea is coloured on the map as a member of Western civilization while the Pacific islands are not, Israel is not differentiated from its Islamic

neighbours, Hong Kong appears as a dot of Western civilization on the coast of China, and it is difficult to discern from the map exactly to what civilization he believes the Philippines belong. At the same time he has both Indonesia and Malaysia as members of Islamic civilization, but is quite happy to quote the Muslim Dr Mahathir as an advocate of the view that there is a common Asian culture. Needless to say no such Asian civilization appears on Huntington's map; instead it is divided among Sinic, Buddhist and Islamic civilizations.

Huntington wants to make civilizations into what might be termed 'deep structures' that are resistant to change and to penetration from outside. According to him, members of a civilization should have no desire to convert to the religion of another civilization, and yet we are living through one of the great ages of religious missionary activity. One of the major features of the contemporary world, as of human history, is the way in which religions jump civilizations, as evidenced by the establishment of a major Buddhist temple in Wollongong, Australia. Conversion is one of the great facts of human history; most human beings do not have the same religion their ancestors had 2000 years ago, and some regions have undergone two or more conversions.

For Huntington, civilizations are like billiard balls: hard, inpenetrable and clashing; even if he has trouble working out which civilizations are which. Central to this argument is the contention that during most of human existence, contacts between civilizations were intermittent or non-existent. This is an extraordinary statement as it ignores the relationship among Europe, Islam and Byzantium during the middle ages, not to mention the constant communications among civilizations that dates back to the Sumerians. To take but one example; this is the impact of Islam on Byzantium that led to the Iconoclast controversy and ultimately influenced the formation of European civilization (Herrin, 1987: ch. 8). In a different context, another example of the movement of ideas across civilizations is Buddhism, which Adshead (1988: 52) describes as the first world institution because of its missionary activity throughout Asia. One can also consider the transmission of Indian Sanscrit civilization to South-east Asia (it survives today in Bali), followed by Islam at a later stage. There have been interactions among civilizations across the whole Eurasian land mass and Africa, and possibly between Asia and the Mesoamerican civilizations; there are no pristine civilizations that have not had contact with, and been influenced by, other civilizations.

Huntington requires not only pristine civilizations but also an historical process whereby the 'West' moved out and imposed its hegemony on every other civilization from about 1500 onwards. Again this is not supported by the evidence. European states, most notably Spain, spent much of the 16th century defending themselves against the imperialist onslaughts of the Ottoman empire. The final invasion of Europe by the Ottomans was repelled at the walls of Vienna in 1683. The Balkans were not finally decolonized until

the early 20th century; and Bosnia can be viewed as a problem created by Ottoman imperialism. Islamic powers such as the Ottomans were imperialists; after all the British did not acquire India from native Indian rulers but largely from an Islamic imperial power, the Mogul empire. Under any model Islam was just as imperialist as Europe: it had the misfortune to lose, but not without first putting up a good fight. To give another example, Felipe Fernandez-Armesto (1996: 414) argues that in the scramble for Africa, Ethiopia behaved like any other imperial power. Relationships among states as well as civilizations are much more complex than Huntington allows.

This problem also marks the attempt by Victor Lee Burke to explain the dynamic of European history in terms of the clashes between European civilization and other civilizations. Subtitling his study 'War Making and State Formation in Europe', Burke attempts to bring together war, states and civilizations. He argues that civilizations clash for a variety of reasons: political, religious, geographical and military. Following Huntington, he also claims that they clash for what he terms identity reasons, there is a 'civilization consciousness', thereby leaving himself open to the same objections that we made to Huntington's attempt to collapse civilization into culture (Burke, 1997: 6). He states that his aim is to put 'states and wars at the centre of social change' (Burke, 1997: 8). It was, he contends, 'the clash of civilizations and war [that] created and transformed the European state system' (Burke, 1997: 10). He wants to combine the clash of civilization thesis with the war and states historical sociology of Mann and Tilly. 'The Western state system,' he claims, 'was the product of the clash among great civilizations' (Burke, 1997: 16). Or as he expresses it, 'Islamic, Viking, Mongol, and Byzantine civilizations created a social structural forge, and the pressure from this forge formed the modern Western state system' (Burke, 1997: 26).

There are two obvious objections to this statement. The first is that it ignores the role of conflict among European states themselves in the creation of the European state system. Certainly one can accept that external forces and warfare and the competition that they spawned were crucial factors in creating European states. Recently, for example, Bailey Stone (1994) has argued the case for the significance of geopolitical factors in explaining the origins of the French revolution, and Thomas Ertman's (1997) model of state development places great emphasis on the way in which particular states responded to external crises. The fact of the matter is that for too long historians have ignored relations between states as a motor of historical change as they pursued an agenda of social history that tended to focus on what went on within states. An historical approach that gives due place to external factors, and which in particular recognizes that Europe has been influenced by other civilizations, is to be welcomed, but it is important to get the balance right. Other civilizations are not the only factor.

The second objection is that an acceptance that external factors, including competitive warfare, are important does not mean that this has to be

conceptualized in terms of clashing civilizations. There can be no doubt that the Viking incursions into Europe had a significant impact on the development of European civilization as it helped to destroy the Carolingian empire and give rise to a fragmented feudal political structure. But was this really a clash of civilizations, or does its significance lie in the way in which parts of Europe responded to the crisis that it created? Certainly it is difficult to see Viking raids as raising a significant identity clash. Equally one would like to know just what impact the Mongol invasion had on England or Italy, while recognizing that it was important for eastern Europe. The case of Byzantium is even more complex because in a sense European civilization could not come into being until western Europe had uncoupled itself from the tutelage of Constantinople as happened with the crowning of Charlemagne as Roman Emperor. The real clash between Europe and Byzantium came in the missionary activity among the Slavs (Bartlett, 1993: 255).

The model of clashing civilizations only really works if we make specific states the carriers of particular civilizations, and so combine political and military power with the more peaceful pursuits of civilization. Other states then should line up behind the major carrier and support it because of their shared civilization. Needless to say this is how Huntington views the role of the United States in relation to the other members of 'Western civilization'. It is also a profoundly anachronistic model of history as it seeks to impose the 20th-century 'ideal' of an ethnically and culturally homogeneous nation-state back onto a past that was composed of much more heterogenous civilizations.

I believe that the clash of civilizations is also largely dependent on one particular aspect of history: the relationship between Christianity and Islam. In this case we appear to have a continuing series of conflicts and clashes involving religious and cultural issues such as the expulsion of the Moors from Spain following the fall of Granada. And yet even here the situation is quite complex. One of the reasons the Muslim armies were able to overrun much of the Eastern Roman Empire was because Byzantine rule proved to be fragile in the face of major schisms within the Christian communities, many of whom were quite happy to be rid of imperial rule. Early Islam did not actively seek to convert Christians and Jews, preferring to levy taxes on them. They were to be protected because they were 'people of the Book'. At the same time Christians did not recognize Islam as a new religion but tended to see it as a Christian heresy (Fletcher, 1997: 304). They certainly did not see it in terms of clashing civilizations. Indeed as Richard Fletcher (1997: 301) has pointed out, in early medieval Europe many laypeople had trouble distinguishing between Christianity and Judaism. Christians living under Islamic rule were influenced by Arab culture and eventually wrote their theology in Arabic, just as the Nestorian Christians further east who took Christianity to central Asia and China used Syriac (Brown, 1997: chs 10, 11). At the same time Islamic civilization absorbed substantial elements of the Greek and

Persian civilizations that had flourished in the areas they had conquered. There simply was no unified Christian civilization, or Islamic civilization.

In the longer term many Christians in those areas conquered by the Arabs became Muslims but it took some three centuries for these conversions to make a significant social impact (Fletcher, 1997: 307). Instead of a clash of civilizations we have a clash between the Byzantine empire and the Arab armies complemented by rather complex relationships developing between their civilizations. During this early period it was not unknown for Christians even in western Europe to convert to either Judaism or Islam. The relationship became more difficult in the 11th century as a revitalized western Christendom began expanding from its Carolingian core, into pagan north-eastern Europe and Spain and the Middle East. The first crusade began inauspiciously with massacres of Jews and culminated in the bloody slaughter of Jews and Muslims in Jerusalem, an event that was to sour Christian–Muslim relations for centuries. Even so, in Spain during this period Muslim communities were not forcibly converted by their Christian conquerors, but were allowed to keep their religion and laws, just as had the Christians following the earlier Moorish invasions (Bartlett, 1993: 208). Again it would be wrong to confuse warfare and conquest conducted by states and the processes of civilizational interaction that were taking place among the different ethnic and religious communities.

What then after 1492 as a religiously cleansed Spain took on the forces of the Islamic Ottoman empire? Do we now get a clash of civilizations between the Christian West and Islam? In this regard I should like to quote from Andre Gunder Frank regarding the situation further east in Asia:

> Muslims (Mamluks, Ottomans, Persians, Indians) fought with each other, and they forged alliances with different Christian states (for example, Portuguese, French, Venetian, Hapsburg), which also vied with each other all in the pursuit of the same end profit. The Muslim Persian Shah Abbas I sent repeated embassies to Christian Europe to elicit alliances against their common Muslim enemies, and later made commercial concessions to the English in compensation for their help in throwing the Portuguese out of Hormuz. (Frank, 1998: 81)

Frank's point is that Muslim states behaved in much the same way as European states, and that religion could sometimes be useful as a means of legitimizing certain actions. It did not, however, drive the actions of states. At the same time it is illegitimate to cordon off European states as somehow 'different' and operating in a world of their own.

Frank also points out (1998: ch. 1) that it was only in the 19th century when European states finally did assert their dominance over the rest of the world that non-Europeans began to be portrayed as intrinsically inferior by Europeans because of civilizational factors. In the 17th and even the 18th century this would have been impossible given the power and wealth of China and India and the military might of the Ottoman empire.

Nineteenth-century Europeans invented the oriental/occidental distinction and inflicted such notions as oriental despotism on the rest of the world. It was no longer a world of conflicting states but one in which the West ruled because of its superior civilization. Out of this hubris was born the idea of history as the clash of civilizations.

At first sight the idea of the clash of civilizations as expounded by Huntington would appear to be a retreat from this hubris. He attacks the idea that there is a universal human history that can be identified with the history of the west and which will lead to a common outcome for all of humanity, as argued for example by Francis Fukuyama (1992). This attack has two prongs: these are the contention that westernization and modernization are not the same thing and an argument regarding the thinness of universality. However it is clear that Huntington wishes to distinguish between the modern and the West in order to defend what he believes to be the unique qualities of Western civilization. The West must defend and preserve its inheritance. This argument rests on a peculiar argument which identifies European civilization as Western civilization and defines its characteristics in terms of Anglo-American liberal values. Huntington provides the following characteristics of Western civilization: classical legacy; Catholicism and Protestantism; multiplicity of languages; separation of spiritual and temporal authority; rule of law; social pluralism; representative bodies; and individualism. Reading this list one would not be aware that communism and fascism dominated large parts of Europe during this century. Huntington claims that the 'West was the West long before it was modern' (Huntington, 1996: 69), and yet he provides an Enlightenment version of that civilization that excludes both paths that have been taken in Europe and potential future paths. The idea that Western civilization is about Magna Carta, as Huntington claims, strikes me as at best flippant and at worse false, particularly as the Magna Carta relates to the very particular politics of medieval England. This is to confuse one vision of European civilization with that civilization itself. As David Gress (1998) has pointed out, there has been a large range of competing ideas attempting to define the nature of Western civilization.

The view that Westernization does not equal modernization holds for Europe itself. European civilization has pursued a number of paths, many of them having very little to do with the supposed values of Western civilization. In his recent book *The Birth of the Leviathan*, Thomas Ertman (1997: especially ch. 4) argues that there were a number of roads taken by the different European states from the medieval period through to 1800. There were patrimonial states, bureaucratic states, patrimonial constitutional states and one example of a bureaucratic constitutional state, Britain. Only Britain really fits Huntington's model of Western civilization. The other states from bureaucratic Prussia to patrimonial France lack some of the characteristics that Huntington suggests mark out Western civilization. A similar argument could be applied to 19th- and 20th-century Europe; there were many in Europe who

believed that the values of 'Western civilization' were not necessary to build a modern state.

At the same time there are characteristics that connect many of the world civilizations. For example, European civilization has links to Orthodox civilization in the shape of Christianity, to Islamic civilization through a common religious and cultural heritage, even to Indian and Buddhist civilizations via shared linguistic, cultural and religious elements. There are no pristine civilizations; there are invariably linkages and things in common. This may not equal universalism but it does emphasize that civilizations have similarities as well as differences, and that to overplay differences produces a distorted historical picture.

So where does this leave us with regard to civilizations and their role as actors in world history? I do not think that any critique of the 'clash of civilizations' model challenges the idea that one fundamental understanding of history involves the development of civilizations and their interactions and relationships with each other. The view that war and states have been crucial in the development of modern Europe and the wider world remains as significant as ever; and surely Burke is correct in emphasizing that it was conflict with non-European powers as well as European ones that assisted in the formation of the European state system. But I believe that it is a mistake to bring together the idea of civilization and the war/states view of history in a single model. Warfare and states go together, not warfare and civilizations. Civilizations are more amorphous entities that generally contain states; they do not have the capacity for force that states possess, and it is difficult to establish a causal link between civilizations and military action. States go to war, not civilizations, even if the leaders of those states sometimes try to use the rhetoric of civilization to justify their actions.

Civilizations are neither states nor are they cultures. Their role as formers of identity is limited owing to their relative remoteness from the immediate experience of everyday life. Civilizations are complex and heterogeneous entities that are capable of developing in a variety of directions and providing the seedbed for a variety of possible cultures. Both Magna Carta and Auschwitz are emblematic of European civilization. Different parts of a civilization develop that civilization in different ways. External factors are also important in the development of civilizations. On this issue I remain attached to the older ideal of civilization as found in the works of Gordon Childe: civilizations interact in a variety of ways as goods, ideas and people move between and among civilizations. The ways of peace have been just as significant as the ways of war. Civilizations are not closed systems like billiard balls but porous and open to outside influences.

The issue of Western civilization remains more problematic. There have been a variety of conceptions of the West and Western civilization; it is a contested ideal. Most certainly Americans and Europeans do not agree

on its meaning and significance. Nevertheless its use in the clash of civilizations theory of history clearly has a political dimension, as it identifies the United States as the principal carrier of Western civilization. The consequences of bringing together state and civilization, the ways of peace and those of war, are both a distortion of history and the corruption of a moral ideal.

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