

Primacy of Imagination Huntington Was Right and Wrong—but Ultimately Really Wrong

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In a series of articles in February 2015, the electronic journal International Politics and Society (IPG) discussed the thesis of Samuel Huntington about the clash of civilizations, which he first presented a good two decades ago. The two WZB directors Michael Zürn and Wolfgang Merkel contributed essays to this series, which set different accents, and which with the kind permission of the IPG we reproduce here in translation with only minor changes.

Samuel Huntington is rightly regarded as one of the most important political scientists of the second half of the twentieth century. His contributions to modernization theory and his work on the spread of democracy—although never undisputed—have had a profound impact on the discipline. Characteristic of his publications is the extremely lively interplay between imagination and systematic empirical observation. Some of his sweeping theses have even stood the test of time. This is not true for his late work “The Clash of Civilizations”. He ignored well-founded empirical objections; after all, the thesis had to stand tall. This one-sidedness was due less to the media demands of a world best-seller than to the personal attitude of an old man who has seen a great deal of life. I witnessed this myself when Huntington presented an early version of his famous essay to an international group of Harvard fellows for discussion over wine and canapés: although he turned a friendly ear to the objections of young and inexperienced scholars, he did not really consider integrating them into his own thinking.

His essay and the book that followed were strong on the side of imagination. He was not comfortable with the liberal confidence that had spread after the fall of the Soviet Empire. For him, a conservative sceptic, the liberal hopes for a world of democratic constitutional states were unrealistic and dangerous. His concern was to throw light on the potential for conflict in a still complex and dangerous world and to challenge the optimistic zeitgeist. He pointed to the continued existence of different ideas about what constitutes a good political order—and especially about the role of religion and the individual in society. And in this he was quite right. When in 2001 an Islamist terrorist organization brought down the highly symbolic Twin Towers, an American president drastically and openly violated fundamental principles of the Western script, and a high-ranking investment banker from Goldman Sachs predicted that the economic future of the world lay in what the new acronym termed the BRIC countries, it was clear that the liberal order still had enemies. Alternative notions of order reconsolidated, and the Western model of order once again faced fundamental challenges.

Huntington was wrong because his “clash of civilizations” was a child of the old view of a world shaped by the East-West divide. He tied competing notions of the world to religions and cultural entities and hence to territorially defined units. Thus, as it were, he naturalized cultures and religions and sought to give them material form by identifying them with territories. The “statization” of cultural entities was due not only to simplification; it was fundamental to his thinking and determined the political implications thereof. We now know that calling the Western order into question and the clash between notions of order in general are only partially motivated by religion and take place not between definable cultural entities but above all within such entities, whose boundaries are, however, progressively disintegrating. The so-called soldiers of Islam are not involved in trench warfare against Western armies at the border between two cultural entities: they are fighting in the West, in North Africa, and in Asia. The

Summary: Samuel Huntington's views on a clash of civilizations as the decisive future conflict line is deeply rooted in his perspective on the Cold War divide. He “staticized” cultures and religions. We now know the forces that call the Western order into question are only partially motivated by religion and above all take place within entities disintegrating. The “wars” that dshihadists fight do not confront Western armies, the conflicts are not about borders between two cultural entities; they take place within the West, in North Africa, and in Asia.

wave of revolution in North Africa shows that Western values are not exclusively on the defensive.

The rise of right-wing populism in Western Europe shows that there are also internal dangers threatening liberalism. But the financial crisis has shown that there is also good reason to set limits to liberalism.

We live in a world that has been divided by a new social fault line in the course of globalization. It can be seen as a conflict between cosmopolitan and communitarian thinking: on the one hand there are those who are for individual rights, for globalization and free trade, for migration and open societies, for international regulation, and sometimes also for international solidarity; on the other there are all those who give primacy to the culture and community to which they belong over excessive individualism and wish to protect their own nation against globalization. That both sides raise an ugly head by foreshortening positions that are in principle normatively arguable is demonstrated by greedy investment bankers, by right-wing populists, and to take an extreme example, the Islamic State. A world in which this cleavage increasingly occurs both within national political systems and at the international level is, however, one quite different from the religious cultural entities of Samuel Huntington.

To this extent, Huntington was empirical wrong. His position was rendered politically and therefore truly wrong by the fact that he wanted to protect Western culture against a conspiracy of evil and thus positioned “the West against the rest.” He thus—*nolens volens*—prepared the intellectual ground for a policy that, in “defending” of the West, is prepared to use means at variance with Western principles and values. Accordingly, he did much to exacerbate the differences underlying the conflict, differences he had actually wanted to warn against.



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(Photo: David Ausserhofer)

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