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CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS OR INTERNATIONAL DIALOGUE?

OBITUARY OF SAMUEL P. HUNTINGTON

(18 APRIL 1927 – 24 DECEMBER 2008)

Thanos Veremis

The long-term problem that will confront the inhabitants of our planet until they discover a credible solution to it could be summarised in Thomas Homer-Dixon's "trilemma": the destruction of our natural habitat, the demand of our system for a sustained economic growth and the ever-increasing complexity of our technological remedies constitute the three elements of the "trilemma". Any attempt to tamper with one of the three will set off an alarm in either or both of the other two. If we try to increase the efficiency of the production of goods, this will add an extra burden on the natural environment. If we improve our technology of production, or make it more environment-friendly, we run the risk of making it complicated beyond the comprehension of the user.¹

There is little doubt that our environmental problems take precedence over the two, but it is in the nature of policy-makers and general managers of enterprises to think and act within the time-frame of their own careers or even the more limiting perspective of their next electoral contest. The attack of 9/11 was probably one of the most destructive distractions of history. It directed the attention of the American public from the pending threat of environmental collapse to the terrorist scare that made another term in power possible for George W. Bush.

The American administration of the previous eight years exhibited little concern for environmental issues and found a unique opportunity to scare the electorate into submission. The terrorists who launched the attacks succeeded beyond their wildest imagination. They secured a second term for Mr Bush and if their primary concern is in the other life, they made their own contribution to the demise of life as we know it. There was therefore an unhappy coincidence of motives to divert the attention of a global public from the most urgent issue threatening its future.

Samuel Huntington, who passed away on 24 December 2008, will not be remembered for his important works on military sociology, but his less

¹ Thomas Homer-Dixon and Sarah Wolfe, "The Matrix of our Troubles", *Toronto Globe and Mail* (16 August 2003).

impressive expeditions into the unchartered territory of civilisations. His “Clash of Civilizations?”² became the precursor of our distractions and provided the foremost intellectual construct for future diversions from this planet’s major problems. Huntington succeeded in launching a feeble attempt to predict the future by attempting an interpretation of the past. Yet his simplistic review of history met with great success. Although replete with mistakes and misunderstandings his alleged anticipation of 9/11 was hailed by the American neo-conservatives, among others, as the prophesy to end all prophesies.

For Huntington in early 1991, the three major interests of the United States in the post-Cold War era were the following:

1. To maintain the United States as the *premier* global power, which in the coming decade would mean countering the Japanese economic challenge
2. To prevent the emergence of a political-military *hegemonic* power in Eurasia
3. To protect concrete American interests in the Third World, primarily in the Persian Gulf and Central America

As developments in 1991-1993 indicated, the United States neither wanted nor could afford to play the role of a solitary world policeman. The Gulf War was fought primarily by technologically advanced American forces, but they enjoyed throughout the conflict the political support or acquiescence of the permanent members of the UN Security Council, as well as heavy financing by German, Japanese, Saudi, Kuwaiti and United Arab Emirate coffers.

The war of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia was met equally by a chorus of interventionist clamour, wherein Western Europeans and Americans competed in advising each other to do the intervening. This suggested that the building of a new world order should be the product of a global partnership of major centres of power, jointly setting the rules of the global game and sharing the onerous burdens of conflict management and resolution. This partnership would share the huge costs of preventing a further widening of the awesome gap separating the rich and satisfied states of the North from the poor and potentially radical global majority of the disadvantaged South.

Whatever their weaknesses, Huntington’s early 1991 views reflected a traditional realist orientation in the field of international relations. His thinking in 1993, however, evolved in a most radical fashion. He moved from a classical balance-of-power worldview to a confrontational concept involving what he calls a “clash of civilizations”. The Huntington article in

² *Foreign Affairs* 72/3 (1993), pp. 22-49.

*Foreign Affairs*³ was an imaginative piece of craftsmanship, but it suffered from oversimplification, generalisation and selective presentation of facts. Furthermore, it contained projections that easily turned into self-fulfilling prophecies when adopted as doctrinal and policy options.

The central premise of his article was that the “fault lines between civilizations are replacing the political and ideological boundaries of the Cold War as the flash points for crisis and bloodshed”. It raised images of earthquake zones engaging “civilisational” regions against each other in an ever-increasing frequency of seismic activity, culminating in a prophecy that the next World War will be a war between civilisations.

Huntington’s new “unit of analysis” in international relations, the civilisation, is defined in terms of “objective elements”, such as language, history and mainly religion. The major civilisations the author identified are the Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American and, possibly, African.

His premise was unclear. Since cultural diversities were always implicit in the clashes between princes, nation-states and ideologies of the past, Huntington’s failure to differentiate “culture” from “civilisation” has caused some confusion in the use of these terms. Instead he used both terms interchangeably. The princes of England and France in the Hundred Years’ War or the Protestants of Northern Europe and the Catholics of the South in the Thirty Years’ War were neither aware of nor interested in their common civilisational background while locked in their feudal, religious or national strife. It would be more in keeping with history if the author pointed out that the intensity of popular identification with the above principles varied in time. For example, a “Christian” Europe meant much more during the Crusades than it does today.

Thus the use of religious criteria – Western Christianity as opposed to Orthodox Christianity and Islam – to indicate the fault lines between hostile cultures is based on flawed premises. Since the intensity of Western European identification with religion is very low today compared to Islamic influence in the Middle East, Huntington could have pointed out the vital difference in attitudes towards state and religion in the West and the Islamic world, respectively. However, the grouping of Protestants and Catholics in a single category of Western Christians ignores a past history of religious strife and vast doctrinal cleavages. On the other hand, Catholics and Orthodox Christians have engaged in long discussions of unifying the two churches and have had

³ *Ibid.*

fewer doctrinal differences between them, which can be summarised in the contested *filioque* clause in their otherwise identical articles of faith.⁴

Another example of hasty conceptual packaging is Huntington's "Islamic civilisation" with its Arabic, Turkic and Malay subcategories. Absent from consideration are Islamic states and populations such as Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Muslims of India, Indonesia and other states. Furthermore, no attempt is made by the author to differentiate between Sunnis, Shiites and other varieties of the Islamic faith, which would have allowed him to follow through in an analogous way to his Catholic-Protestant versus Orthodox differentiation in the case of the Christians. Finally, one can only marvel at Huntington's attempt to lump together into a single African civilisation a continent known for its ethnic, religious, racial and cultural diversity.

The major misconception of the "Clash of Civilizations?", however, is the explicit proposition that future conflicts will be *intercivilisational*, when the overwhelming statistical evidence to date suggests that most conflicts in the era since the Peace of Westphalia have been *intracivilisational*. It sounds almost bizarre, for example, to dismiss World Wars I and II with more than 100 million dead (including the Nazi genocidal orgy in the Jewish Holocaust), as "Western civil wars".

"Clash of Civilizations?" is rich in provocative, yet hard-to-substantiate propositions. We can refer only to some of the most interesting ones here.

One of Huntington's major propositions is that "Western concepts differ *fundamentally* from those prevalent in other civilizations. Western ideas of individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, and the separation of church and state, often have little resonance in Islamic, Confucian, Japanese, Hindu, Buddhist, or Orthodox cultures." This leads him to adopt the garrison-state mentality of the West versus the Rest.

The chief threat for the West, according to Huntington, would emanate from what he calls the Confucian-Islamic connection. His warning is sober: almost without exception, Western countries are reducing their military power; China, North Korea and several Middle Eastern states, however, are significantly expanding their military capabilities. The Confucian-Islamic coalition's goal is to possess credible nuclear, chemical, biological and missile delivery capabilities, without which one cannot challenge Western primacy.

⁴ Thanos Veremis, *Πολιτισμός και πολιτική* [Culture and politics], Athens: Sideris, 2001, pp. 126-129.

His concluding scenario of a Chinese-Iranian-Pakistani alliance against India-Saudi Arabia and other Arab states is wholly fictional.⁵

Concerning the hypothesis positing the development of a Confucian-Islamic connection, there is, in our view, no convincing evidence that such an axis will ever exist. The Chinese leadership will more than likely continue its role as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, rather than spearhead a revolutionary and revanchist challenge as leader of the world's oppressed.

The truth of the matter is that there is no evidence that the democratic world is threatened by an alliance of nondemocratic or rogue states. It is certainly not wise to encourage such states into a grand alliance against the West. "It is unquestionably a priority of the security strategy to avoid a global bipolarity. Global bipolarity would oblige countries all over the world to take sides, making it impossible to promote concerted action to face global challenges ranging from climate change to food and financial crises..."⁶

Far from planning to cause harm to the West and especially to the US, China in the last decade has invested more than \$1 trillion earnings from manufacturing exports in US government bonds and government-backed mortgage debt. "That has lowered US interest-rates and helped fuel a historic consumption binge and housing bubble."⁷ To predict as Huntington did, that China would prepare to war with the major user of the credit available from the vast Chinese trade surpluses, is wide off the mark. Why would China cause harm to an economy so closely linked to its own? As for the other global giants, India, Russia and Brazil, they show no inclination to be hostile against the West unless provoked. The financial crisis that recently hit the West made the confrontational policies of the American neo-conservatives even less relevant. The electoral victory of Barack Obama has further dimmed their prospects.

Thinking along the lines of civilisations in conflict and in terms of cultural incompatibility ultimately poses a serious challenge for the United States, that most remarkable multiethnic and multicultural democracy. The deep hatreds that would be generated by race, religious and linguistic "future wars" among culture areas could boomerang and have a serious ripple effect in the United States. For what would be the choice for hyphenated Americans whose roots cannot be traced to Protestant and Catholic Western Europe? What would be

⁵ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996, pp. 313-318.

⁶ Álvaro de Vasconcelos, "Avoiding Confrontational Bipolarity", *ISSues* [EU Institute for Security Studies] (27 October 2008), pp. 1-2.

⁷ Mark Landler, "Two Economic Giants Addicted to Credit", *The International Herald Tribune* (28 December 2008).

the feelings of Hispanic-Americans, African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Americans of Slavic descent and a host of others if they were made to feel that they have no place within the narrow confines of the Western civilisation as defined by Huntington?⁸

Had he been around today, Viscount Castlereagh's recipe would have involved a concerted response to the new global challenges engaging the major centres of power – the United States, the EU and China and a politically and economically resuscitated Russia. The task of global management is too large and costly for any single power to accomplish, including the United States. In concert rather than in conflict, we can help address the major problems of the twenty-first century that will be ordered on a North-South rather than East-West axis.

One may wonder if our current global economic crisis is a further distraction from our main consideration, or a blessing in disguise that will forge a new global frame of mind putting our priorities in the right order. So far the obvious lesson is that we should not place credence on individual or collective rationality. Are people in great numbers economically rational when they borrow above their capacity to repay their loans and even remortgage their houses in order to extend their spending spree?

Was it a blind faith in the enlightened sense of self-interest that most citizens allegedly possess that made governments of developed states insouciant to controls and regulations of credit?

Will the diminished faith in human rationality cause the political pendulum to swing to the right? Unlike Liberals, Conservatives have always been wary of man's capacity to order his life and therefore placed constraints on the freedom of choice as well as regulations on human activity.

Or will the current crisis lead to a paradigm shift and to an altogether new societal model? From using competition as a hallmark of creativity, into prioritising cooperation and collective decisions? Instead of encouraging easy loans for unbridled consumerism, pursue a careful pattern of spending? From the present predicament of drawing from toxic petrochemicals, to renewable sources of energy that will salvage the planet from the greenhouse effect?

No doubt there is a price to such development that will curtail our high rates of economic growth. Developing countries and emerging markets will be the least eager to fall in line with the new paradigm. The developed world, however, will need to offset its losses from the redistribution of material

⁸ T. Coulombis and T. Veremis, "Samuel P. Huntington: 'The West: Unique, not Universal': A Response", *Journal of Modern Hellenism* 14 (1997), pp. 159-163.

growth and look forward to development and growth in fields of knowledge. As Nobel laureate Paul Krugman put it, “The only important structural obstacles to world prosperity are the obsolete doctrines that clutter the minds of men.”⁹

Selected publications of Samuel P. Huntington

- *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (1957)
- *The Common Defence: Strategic Programs in National Politics* (1961)
- *Political Order in Changing Societies* (1968)
- *The Crisis of Democracy: On the Governability of Democracies* (1976)
- *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (1981)
- *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (1991)
- *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996)
- *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* (2004)

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⁹ Paul Krugman, “What to Do”, *New York Review of Books* (20 November 2008).