

The Clash of Civilisations

(Book Summary)

*According to **Samuel Huntington**, the famous historian, the post cold war world is one of seven or eight major civilizations. Cultural commonalities and differences shape the interests, antagonisms and associations of states. The most important countries in the world come from different civilizations. The local conflicts most likely to escalate into broader wars are those between groups and states from different civilizations. The key issues on the international agenda involve differences among civilizations. Huntington emphasizes that human history is the history of civilization. It is impossible to think of the development of humanity in any other terms.*

Understanding civilization

A civilization is the broadest cultural entity. Villages, regions, ethnic groups, nationalities, religious groups, all have distinct cultures at different levels of cultural heterogeneity. A civilization is the highest cultural grouping of people. A civilization is defined both by objective elements such as language, history, religion, customs & institutions and by the subjective self identification of people.

Huntington has identified seven major contemporary civilizations:

- Sinic;
- Japanese;
- Hindu;
- Islamic;
- Western;
- Latin American;
- African.

The central elements of any culture or civilization are language and religion. English, the world's way of communicating across cultures cannot really be considered an universal language. Moreover, different types of English are used across the world.

The late twentieth century has seen a global resurgence of religions around the world. That resurgence has involved the intensification of religious consciousness and the rise of fundamentalist movements.

Modernisation and westernization

The expansion of the West has promoted both the modernization and the westernization of non Western societies. The political and intellectual leaders of these societies have responded to the Western impact in one or more of three ways:

- rejecting both modernization and westernization;
- embracing both;
- embracing modernization and rejecting westernization.

In general, westernization and modernization seem to be closely linked. A non western society absorbs substantial elements of western culture and makes slow progress towards modernization. As the pace of modernization increases, however, the rate of Westernization declines and the indigenous culture goes through a revival. Further modernization then alters the civilizational balance of power between the west and non-western society and strengthens commitment to the indigenous culture. Modernization enhances the economic, military and political power of the society as a whole. Modernisation encourages the people of that society to have confidence in their culture and to become

culturally assertive. At the individual level, modernization generates feelings of alienation as traditional bonds and social relations are broken and leads to crises of identity. Religion often provides an answer to this identity crisis.

It is not necessary that non Western societies must westernize in order to modernize. Japan, Singapore and Taiwan have all become modern societies without becoming western. Even extreme proponents of anti westernism and the revitalization of indigenous cultures do not hesitate to use modern techniques of email, cassettes and television to promote their cause. Modernisation strengthens indigenous cultures and reduces the relative power of the West. Huntington emphasizes that the world is becoming more modern but less western.

The resurgence of religion

As a result of modernization, longstanding sources of identity and systems of authority are disrupted. People move from the countryside into the city, become separated from their roots and take new jobs. They interact with large numbers of strangers and are exposed to new sets of relationships. They have new sources of identity, new forms of stable community and new sets of moral precepts to provide them with a sense of meaning and purpose.

In times of rapid, social change, established identities dissolve. The self must be redefined and new identities created. For people suffering from an identity crisis, religion provides compelling answers. Religious groups provide small social communities to replace those lost through urbanization.

Many religious groups meet social needs not taken care of by the state. These include the provision of medical and hospital services, kindergartens and schools, care for the elderly, prompt relief from natural disasters and welfare and social support during periods of economic deprivation. In some cases, the breakdown of order and of civil society creates vacuums which are filled by religious, often fundamentalist, groups. If traditionally dominant religions do not meet the emotional and social needs of the uprooted, other religious groups move in to do so. This greatly expands their membership and the saliency of religion in social and political life.

Cultural assertion

Successful economic development generates self confidence and assertiveness on the part of those who produce it and benefit from it. Wealth, like power, is often a demonstration of moral and cultural superiority. As they have become more successful economically, East Asians have not hesitated to emphasize the distinctiveness of their culture and to trumpet the superiority of their values and way of life compared to those of the west and other societies. Asian societies have become decreasingly responsive to US demands and interests and increasingly able to resist pressure from the US on other Western countries. The mounting self-confidence of East Asia has given rise to an emerging Asian universalism comparable to that which has been characteristic of the west. Cultural assertion follows material success. If at some point, as Huntington puts it humorously, India supplants East Asia as the world's economically most rapidly developing area, the world should be prepared for disquisitions on the superiority of Hindu culture, the contributions of the caste system to economic development and how by returning to its roots and overcoming the western legacy left by British imperialism, India finally achieved its proper place in the top rank of civilizations!

Geopolitics, trade and culture

Spurred by modernization, global politics is being reconfigured along cultural lines. People and countries with similar cultures are coming together. At the same time, those with different cultures are coming apart. Alignments defined by ideology and superpower relations are giving way to alignments defined by culture and civilization. Political boundaries are increasingly being redrawn to coincide

with cultural ones; ethnic, religious and civilizational. Cultural communities are replacing cold war blocs. The fault lines between civilizations are becoming the central lines of conflict in global politics.

In the past, the patterns of trade among nations have followed and paralleled the patterns of alliance among nations. In the emerging world, patterns of trade will be decisively influenced by the patterns of culture. Businessmen make deals with people they can understand and trust. States surrender sovereignty to international associations composed of like minded states they understand and trust. The roots of economic cooperation lie in cultural communality.

Countries with distinct cultural groupings belonging to the same civilization may become deeply divided with separation either occurring (Czechoslovakia) or becoming a possibility (Canada). Deep divisions are however much more likely to emerge within a cleft country, where large groups belong to different civilizations. Such divisions and the tensions that go with them often develop when a majority group belonging to one civilization attempts to define the state as its political instrument and to make its languages, region and symbols, those of the state.

The divisive effect of civilizational fault lines has been most notable in those cleft countries held together during the cold war by communist authoritarian regimes. With the collapse of communism, culture has replaced ideology as the magnet of attraction and repulsion. Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union have come apart and divided into new entities grouped along civilizational lines.

The 1990s have seen the eruption of a global identity crisis. In coping with identity crisis, what counts for people are blood and belief, faith and family. People rally behind those with similar ancestry, religion, language, values and institutions and distance themselves from those with different ones.

In today's world, improvements in transportation and communication have produced more frequent, more intense, more symmetrical and more inclusive interactions among people of different civilizations. As a result, their civilizational identities have become increasingly salient. The French, Germans, Belgians and the Dutch increasingly think of themselves as Europeans. Middle East Muslims identify with and rally to the support of Bosnians and Chechens. Chinese throughout East Asia identify their interests with those of the mainland. Russians identify with and provide support to Serbs.

The changing balance of power among civilizations makes it more and more difficult for the West to achieve its goals with respect to weapons proliferation, human rights, immigration and other issues. To minimize its losses in this situation, requires the west to wield skillfully its economic resources as carrots and sticks in dealing with other societies. The West's ability to pursue these strategies will be determined by the nature and intensity of its conflicts with the challenger civilizations on the one hand and the extent to which it can develop common interests with the swing civilizations, on the other.

Conflicts

Inter civilizational conflict takes two forms:

Micro level: Faulty line conflicts occur between neighboring states from different civilizations, between groups from different civilizations within a state and between groups which are attempting to create new states out of the wreckage of the old. Fault line conflicts are particularly prevalent between Muslims and Non Muslims.

Global/Macro level: Here, core state conflicts occur among the major states of different civilizations. The various issues involved are:

1. relative influence in shaping global developments and the actions of global international organizations such as UN, IMF, World Bank.
2. relative military power, which manifests itself in controversies over non proliferation and arms control and in arms races.
3. economic power and welfare, manifested in disputes over trade, investment and other issues.
4. people, involving efforts by a state from one civilization to protect kinsmen in other civilizations, to discriminate against people from another civilization or to exclude from its territory, people belonging to another civilization.
5. values & culture, involving efforts by the state to impose its values on the people of another civilization.
6. territory, in which core states become front line participants in fault line conflicts.

Islam and the west

The conflict between Islam and the West has intensified in the late twentieth century due to the following reasons:

- Population growth has generated large numbers of unemployed and disaffected young people. They become recruits to Islamist causes, exert pressure on the neighboring societies and migrate to the west.
- The Islamic resurgence has given Muslims a renewed confidence in the distinctive character and worth of their civilization and values compared to those of the west.
- The West's tendency to dominate and universalize its values has created resentment among Muslims.
- The collapse of communism removed a common enemy of the west and Islam. Each is now perceived as the major threat to the other.
- The increasing contact between and intermingling of Muslims and Westerners stimulate in each a new sense of their own identity and how it differs from that of the other. Interaction and intermingling also exacerbate differences over the rights of the members of one civilization in a country dominated by members of the other civilization.

According to Huntington, the underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is the problem arising out of a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power. The problem for Islam is not the CIA or the US Department of Defense. It is the west, a different civilisation, whose people are convinced of the universality of their culture and believe that their superior, if declining power imposes on them the obligation to extend that culture throughout the world. These are the basic ingredients that have resulted in tensions between Islam and the West.

The Muslims have been more involved in inter group violence compared to people of other civilizations. Various reasons have been offered to explain this phenomenon:

- Islam has from the start been a religion of the sword and glorified military values.
- The spread of Islam across many countries brought Muslims into direct contact with many different peoples who were conquered and converted and the legacy of this process remains.
- Islam draws a sharp line between Muslims and non Muslims and merges religion and politics.
- Muslims are victims of a widespread anti Muslim prejudice.

- There is no core state in Islam. Islam is a source of instability in the world because it lacks a dominant centre.
- The demographic expansion in Muslim societies and the availability of large numbers of unemployed males between the age of 15 and 30 is a natural source of instability and violence.

The Asian challenge

The economic development of Asia and the growing self confidence of Asian societies are disrupting international politics in at least three ways.

- Economic development can led to strengthening of military capabilities and allow those issues to surface which had been buried during the cold war.
- Economic development will led to more intense conflicts between the West, especially the US and Asian societies.
- The Chinese influence will increase. Countries will either bandwagon with China or attempt to accommodate this large country.

Fault line wars go through processes of intensification, expansion, containment, interruption and rarely, resolution. These processes usually begin sequentially but they also often overlap and may be repeated. Once started, fault line wars, like other communal conflicts, tend to take on a life of their own and to develop in an action-reaction pattern. Previously multiple and casual identities become focused and hardened. Communal conflicts are appropriately termed 'identity wars'. As violence increases, the initial issues at stake tend to get redefined more exclusively as 'us' against them and group cohesion and commitment are enhanced. Political leaders expand and deepen their appeals to ethnic and religious loyalties. Civilization consciousness strengthens in relation to other identities. A hate dynamic emerges, in which mutual fears, distrust and hatred feed on each other. Each side dramatizes and magnifies the distinction between the forces of virtue and the forces of evil.

The challenge for the west

The west differs from other civilizations in that it has had an overwhelming impact on all the other civilizations that have existed since 1500. It also started off the process of modernization and industrialization. Other societies are now attempting to catch up with the west in wealth and modernity. The development of the west to date, has however not deviated significantly from the revolutionary patterns common to civilizations throughout history. The Islamic resurgence and the economic dynamism of Asia demonstrate that other civilizations are live and well. And at least potentially threatening to the west. A major war between the west and these civilizations or a gradual relative decline of the west cannot be ruled out. Alternatively, the west could go through a period of revival, reverse its declining influence in world affairs and reconfirm its position as the leader whom other civilizations follow and imitate.

The over riding lesson of the history of civilizations is that many things are probable but nothing is inevitable. Civilizations can and have reformed and renewed themselves. The central issue for the West is whether, quite apart from any external challenges, it is capable of stopping and reversing the internal processes of decay. Can the West renew itself or will it give way to other economically and demographically more dynamic civilizations. Some of the problems the west has to address include:

- low economic growth, savings & investment rates
- low birth rate
- increase in crime, drug use and violence
- family decay

Concluding notes

A world in which cultural identities – ethnic, national, religious, civilizational – are central and cultural affinities and differences shape the alliances, antagonisms and policies of states has three broad implications for the west in general and the United States in particular:

- Statesmen can constructively alter reality only if they recognize and understand it.
- American foreign policy formulation has to overcome its reluctance to abandon and at times reconsider policies adopted to meet cold war needs.
- Cultural and civilizational diversity challenges the western and particularly American belief in the universal relevance of Western culture. Western belief in the universality of western culture suffers from three problems – it is false, it is immoral and it is dangerous.

Western civilization is unique not because it is universal but because of its unique features, Christianity, pluralism, individualism and rule of law. The principal responsibility of western leaders is not to attempt to reshape other civilizations but to preserve, protect and renew the unique qualities of western civilization. This responsibility falls overwhelmingly on the US.

In the coming years, the avoidance of major inter civilizational wars requires core states to refrain from intervening in conflicts in other civilizations. This is the first requirement of peace in a multi civilizational, multi polar world. The second requirement is that core states should negotiate with each other to contain or to halt fault line wars between states or groups from their civilizations. The third rule is that people in all civilizations should search for and attempt to expand the values, institutions and practices they have in common with people of other civilizations. The future of both peace and civilization depends upon understanding and cooperation among the political, spiritual and intellectual leaders of the world's major civilizations.