The border that is not there: a critique of Samuel Huntington's concept of "Clash of Civilizations"

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Abstract

Huntington's effort in the "The Clash of Civilizations?" to explain and predict fault lines for conflict emergence in the post-Cold War era not only reinforced neo-realist approaches to world politics, but also informed a particular geopolitical ontology. The paradigm he advanced 25 years ago is grounded on an essentialistic and reductive perception of the relation between identity and culture, and could be considered, from a critical standpoint in the post 9/11 context, a self-fulfilling prophecy. The overlapping of Huntington's civilization borders with conflict fault lines is problematic from various perspectives, including the historical and cultural one. Borrowing Agnew's concept of "territorial trap", this essay presents a critique of the civilizational borders, as presented by Huntington in his famous text.

Introduction

This essay focuses mostly on geopolitical texts, which emphasize identity, in particular when identity is equated with belonging to religious and ethnic groups. Furthermore, I will adopt a critical position towards the neo-realist geopolitical stand, represented in this essay by Huntington (1993). When formulating my criticism, I will use theories stemming from the constructivist approach, as well as critical geopolitics. I will propose that, in order to describe the position that Huntington takes towards identity, a concept adapted from Agnew could be used, namely "identitarian trap" (1994, 53, *apud* Shah 2010, 387).

The relevance of identity in relation to conflict has been stressed by various scholars. Mary Kaldor (1999) relates globalization and identity in order to explore the new wars of the post-Cold War era, and particularly to describe the emergence of a new "politics of identity". Other scholars also point out that identity is a central enabler for escalatory processes of group

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dynamics (Demmers, 2012, 38), as well as an element which can help prevent, limit, and end intractable conflicts (Kriesberg, 2003). As such, understanding the dynamics of identity formation from the point of view of group identity is key to understanding the geopolitical readings of conflict.

The Post-Cold War Context

After the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Iron Curtain, the geopolitical view of the international system changed dramatically. From the simple, straight-forward bipolar ideological division of the world, a multitude of entities with diverse and diverging interests gained visibility. Adding to the complexity of the new context, the entities could no longer be associated ideologically with either democracy, and hence the USA, or communism, hence the USSR, and thus, almost automatically, be recognized as enemies or supporters. In geopolitical terms, this suddenly visible multitude of international actors with their own agendas and political interests, shifting alliances and varying intra-state organization modes, generated considerable confusion and preoccupation regarding possible future conflicts.

In this context, a need for simplification, for rendering intelligible in the old binary scheme of good versus bad, of the complex geopolitical setting of the world became utterly necessary. This tendency is attested by neo-realist, or traditional geopolitical stands. In Huntington's much acclaimed essay from 1993, this "new" and complex world is rendered intelligible through a call to the forum of culture:

> "It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future" (Huntington, 1993, 22).

The formulation of Huntington's hypothesis leaves no doubt as to which is the theoretical background informing it: "nation states" are considered the only relevant actors in the international system, while the continued USA primacy in the international world system is also stressed throughout his article, denoting a neo-realist approach. Also, while he includes nations and groups as possible actors engaged in conflict, he stresses that, from a cultural perspective, the units of analysis should be even larger, namely civilizations.

Identity and civilizational borders

Huntington's open definition of civilization is: "A civilization is [...] the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species" (1993, 24). He goes on to assess which are the contemporary civilizations, and presents them in this order: Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American and "possibly African civilization" (idem, 25). The primacy of the Western civilization as uncontested is underlying although his essay, and this listing is rather telling both of the hierarchy in the world system, as seen by neo-realists, as well as to the spatial,

ethnic and religious characteristics of each of the civilizations.

While the Western civilization would need no definitions, the subsequent civilizations seem to be delimitated taking into considerations different factors. As listed and named by Huntington, the Japanese civilization is solely considered an entity based on its geographical specificities, and particularly its isolation from the neighboring continent. The Confucian, Islamic and Hindu civilizations are named in direct relation to the dominant religion of its assumed members, and, except China, seem to be relatively less bounded territorially. The Slavic-Orthodox civilization is defined on religious and broad ethnic grounds, leaving out the non-Slavic Orthodox (such as the Greeks and the Romanians in Europe, or the Copts in Africa and Middle East), which leaves one wondering if they would be included in the Western civilization (which, by exclusion, is mostly considered to overlap geographical areas where Catholicism and Protestantism are prominent). The Latin American civilization, and the "possible African civilization" (quotation marks are to stress the postcolonial critique of Huntington's choice of wording) are no longer defined neither in religious, nor in ethnic terms: they simply encompass whole continents, with their mosaic of ethnicities, religions, cultures and political ideologies.

According to Huntington's definition, then, the civilizations are the biggest, more encompassing groups, sharing a civilizational identity and civilizational commonalities. Moreover, in Huntington's view, these groups seem to be mutually exclusive, in that one cannot be a Muslim and belong to the Western civilization at the same time, and encompass the whole population of the world. For Huntington, group membership is a given: by naming the groups and the populations it encompasses, he ignores the cognitive aspect of group construction, contrary to Tajfel's social identity theory (1981, *apud* Demmers, 2012, 20). However, sociological approaches differ in that they:

> "place the origins of social identities in the social and the political, not the individual. Social identities are seen as socially constructed, as largely externally ascribed and as serving social and political functions. [...] It is about categories and relationships. The social identity concept tells us about the categorical characteristics – such as nationality, gender, religion, ethnicity – that locate people in social space. A person has a certain social identity if (s)he shares certain characteristics with others." (Demmers, 2012, 20-21).

Since identity is considered to be socially constructed, it is asserted that identity, including religious and ethnic, is also contextual, dynamic and changeable. In relation to violent conflict, theoreticians point to caution when establishing causality effects, as the main group characteristic (ethnicity, religious, etc.) may appear to be the motivation for pursuing a violent course of actions. As Demmers points out from a sociological perspective, "high levels of groupness are often the result and not the cause of violent conflict" (2012, 23).

We see thus, that Huntington's definition of civilization relies on a cultural dimension of identity, perceived as being stronger than all the others, national, gender, religion and ethnicity. However, since he fails to address the multidimensionality of social identity, his categorization of individuals seems to attribute fixed places for people in the social space, according to their perceived belonging to a civilization or another. While social identity is conceptualized sociologically in a relational perspective, namely the relationship between the individual and the

social environment, Huntington's definition of civilizations overrides individual identity and agency in regard to social identity, by prescribing immutable group belonging according to almost random factors and classifications.

Furthermore, Huntington does not discuss the political functions of the civilizational identities he proposes, other than specifying that "[t]he clash of civilizations will dominate global politics" (1993, 22). Not only that he does not problematize the political functions or implication of social identity in the civilization framework he develops, but he goes further to say that: "differences among civilizations are not only real; they are basic. Civilizations are differentiated from each other by history, language, culture, tradition, and, most important, religion." (idem, 25). He thus considers the civilizations identities as fixed, immutable, and mutually exclusive, preferring thus an essentialist take on identity, considering religion as the central and most important civilizational differentiator.

Views from the border

... civilizations can ... example on the ... re than 40% of ... found in Latin

Figure 1- Putzger historischer Weltatlas Cornelsen, 1990

(http://www.pewforum.org/2014/11/13/religion-in-latin-america/), and also Catholicism has a substantial presence in Africa. Further criticism was brought regarding the civilizational border between Western and Central Europe, and the Balkans, which, according to Huntington's classifications of civilizations, should reflect the distinction between the Western civilization and the Slavic-Orthodox. Although, in fact, the Balkans are one of the good examples of blurred civilizational borders: (see Figure 1).

Not only that the languages are very different, including Slavic, Finno-Ugric and Latin, but the distribution of believers according to their creed is no homogenous. This is also the border that Huntington himself chose to visually present within his essay, as he considers it "the most significant dividing line", as it was in 1500 (1993, 30) - see Figure 2.

The relevance of this civilizational border has been subject to criticism from other scholars as well. Testing Huntington's

Figure 2 - "The Clash of Civilizations?", S. Huntington, Foreign Affairs 1993

hypothesis within the political background of European integration, three countries were chosen for the purpose of the analysis, two from the Balkans, Romania and Bulgaria, and one which would correspond to the Western civilization, namely Slovakia. The analysis concluded that:

> "The most important legacy that still shapes today's political culture is the *recent communist past*. No evidence was discovered to support the effects of more remote cultural legacies. Political attitudes in former Habsburg and Catholic Slovakia are similar to former Ottoman and Orthodox Christian Romania and Bulgaria. Nostalgia for the "golden age" of communism, distrust in political governments and a preference for direct rather than representative democracy creates a populist syndrome present in all three countries."(Pippidi & Mindruta, 2002, 193, my italics)

Hence, right on the civilizational border that Huntington highlighted, it is rather difficult, if not impossible, to encounter the diverging, mutually exclusive civilizational characteristics of individuals and groups, which would lead to the clash.

The permeability of this particular civilizational frontier to the North can be further questioned when considering Lundén's (2015) effort to reveal the influence geopolitics has in the spatial distribution of religion, and in particular of the mosaic of creeds present in the Baltic Sea Region since 1600 and until World War I. Referring to the territory of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Lundén states that:

> "[...] was from the start multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious. During the late sixteenth-century Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists, *Muslims, Armenians* and *Jews* as well as persons belonging to radical Christian sects lived together in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Most of the major religions had even made a famous agreement in 1573, the Confederation of Warsaw, in which *they promised mutual respect and co-existence*." (2015, 238, my italics)

Throughout his analysis, Lundén describes and correlates the intra-territorial dynamics, with the larger regional setting, and the changes in status of the different creeds according to the geopolitical context, thus pointing out how religion was instrumentalized politically and socially, both by the ruling elites, as well as their subjects. The changing religious and political landscape not only leads to territorial changes of the states, but is in close relation to internal organizational changes, and of course the regulation of religions (Lundén, 2015, 246). As such, historical and geopolitical evidence shows not only that borders based on creed adherence are volatile, but also that religion and politics, even in the post-Westphalian context, are profoundly interconnected, and interdependent.

Hence, in the contemporary complex and interdependent international system, it becomes very difficult to make accurate geopolitical predictions, and even more so on the middle to long term. While providing a detailed analysis of the ideological, political and ethnic context in Crimea in the first half of the 90s, Dawson (1997) cannot foresee the changing international geopolitical stage. As such, while she presents Crimea as a success case in avoiding violent conflict after the dissolution of the USSR, the more recent developments in the change of the status of the territory, and its integration within the Russian Federation in 2014, rightfully eluded her account.

The identitarian trap

Critical geopolitist John Agnew put forward a concept which explains the essentialization of a state as equivalent to its territory. His criticism stems from a constructivist approach which emphasizes the importance of discursive constructs within geopolitics. Thus, the concept of "territorial trap" can be explained as:

> "When the territoriality of the state is debated by international relations theorists the discussion is overwhelmingly in terms of the persistence or obsolescence of the territorial state as an unchanging entity rather than in terms of its *significance* and *meaning* in different historical-geographical circumstances. Contemporary events call this approach into question. The end of the Cold War, the increased velocity and volatility of the world economy, and the emergence of political movements outside the framework of territorial states, suggest the need to consider the territoriality of states in historical context. Conventional thinking relies on three geographical assumptions-states as fixed units of sovereign space, the domestic/foreign polarity, and states as 'containers' of societies - that have led into the 'territorial trap'." (Agnew, 1994, 53)

My intention is to draw a parallel between what Agnew describes as leading towards the 'territorial trap', and a possible "identitarian trap". As such, in Huntington's case, it is clear that his hypothesis and argumentation is grounded on a civilizational identity perspective, which he find explanatory for future conflicts. The significance and meaning of the civilizational identity he underlines is not problematized in a historical and political context, other than superficially, like for example: "Historically, Turkey has been the most profoundly torn country. For the United States, Mexico is the most immediate torn country. Globally the most important torn country is Russia." (Huntington, 1993, 43).

As briefly shown above, the question of spatiality and identity within Huntington's article can also be questioned, both from the perspective of the actual geographical space which each of the civilizations is supposed to occupy, as well as from the perspective of clear, impermeable civilizational borders. From a cultural identity perspective, this is translated into the complete invisibility of cultural exchanges and spillovers ("Cultural and creative spillovers in Europe: Report on a preliminary evidence review"), particularly on the civilizational borders, and, given the globalization and technological advances, at global level.

Furthermore, he does not look into the differences within the civilizations he delineated, such as between Sunni and Shiite Muslims, perceiving each civilization and static, homogenous and monolithically. This simplistic view obscures processes of identity formation within each of the civilizations, which can have political impact at a global political level. Also, since Huntington's definition of civilization is rather broad, civilizational identity does seem to encompass, or be used as a container for more complex, contextualized and politically engaged identities. This in turn leads to a depoliticization of the civilizational identity, which simply appears as grounded in immutable cultural characteristics.

Conclusion

To conclude, Huntington's effort, grounded in neo-realism, to predict both the nature of and the settings where "the clash"(es) will occur in the future, proved futile and irrelevant to the complex cultural and political context of the contemporary world. Grounding his assertions and suppositions on essentialist considerations, he put forward a simple geopolitical map, in which the world is divided into monolithically and fixed cultural blocks, characterized primarily by their religion, ethnicity and territorial distribution. It can be argued that, by presenting the global system in this perspective, he fell into the "identitarian trap". Not only his perspective is opaque to complex group identity dynamics, intra-state and regional social and political processes, but it utterly fails to describe, explain or predict any relevant aspect of contemporary conflicts.

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