"The Clash of Civilizations?": reality or approach 25 years later. Review of Samuel Huntington's idea of identity, ethnicity and religion from several theoretical stances

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Abstract

After 25 years, Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations?'" continues to ignite debates around concepts like culture, ethnicity and religion which, for five 'reasons', the author considers realities doomed to be at the origin of conflict among civilizations: differences among civilizations, the increasing interactions of a smaller world; unfitting sense of belonging to the civilizational consciousness in the West-East debate and the resilience of cultural characteristics. In this review, I present Huntington's 'realities' approached by authors that, from five different theoretical standpoints, add to the debate on the origin of cultural, ethnic and religious conflicts. Do these realities, in their ontological position, become factors of conflict, or, depending on the angle authors give them, can (and actually do) have other destinies?

Keywords: Samuel Huntington / Clash of Civilizations / Theories of International Relations / Origin of Conflicts / culture, ethnicity and religion

Introduction

Since 9/11, identity, culture, ethnicity and religion became major issues in International Relations. The relevance of culture, ethnicity and religion can be perceived by the number of studies and articles published since then (Philpott, 2002 and 2009; Botelho Moniz, 2016). In the pages of some of the major works on the subject (e.g. Toft, 2003; Reus-Smit, 2018; Appleby, 2000) it is mandatory to find a reference to "The Clash of Civilizations?" (Huntington, 1993) as a milestone of prophetic proportion. In his 1993 article, Huntington offers a "new pattern of conflict" that will substitute the war of princes, nations, ideologies and superpowers and will be the outcome of the "interaction between the west and non-Western civilizations and among non-Western civilizations" (Huntington, 1993: 22-23). The article ends with a wishful thought on the need to build a co-existence among civilizations "the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity" (Huntington, 1993: 24), but the last pages of Huntington's article are a call to the West in order to be prepared for the 'clash'. It has a prophetical taste,, but it relies on the 'realist' assumption that conflict is inevitable and that there is a need, which best protects western national interest, to build a balance of power for which Huntington offers some 'realist' and 'power-based' short-term and long-term advices (Huntington, 1993: 48-49).

Huntington presents us with five reasons to why these cultural entities will 'clash: 1) the basic differences among civilizations (history, language, culture, tradition and religion); 2) the increasing interactions of a smaller world; 3) the social change that occurs when people depart from local identities and no longer find belonging in the weakening nation-state; 4) the growth of civilizational consciousness in the West-East debate; and 5) the resilience of cultural characteristics, less prone to change than chosen economic or political models and the cultural affinity of economic blocs (Huntington, 1993: 25-29).

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The analysis of these 'reasons' will permit us to debate that, depending on the approach, identity, ethnicity and religion, they can be factors of conflict or opportunities for peace. By reviewing these 'reasons' and verifying what various authors add, we can evaluate the solutions proposed in order to better take part in the debate. My own perspective is that the purpose of peace can be better served in an analysis that permits several perspectives to dialogue and offers scientific contributions that can be critically processed and integrated.

A critical stance from a constructivist perspective

Huntington offers civilizational identity (history, language, culture, tradition and religion) as the cause for enmity while Jolle Demmers describes her understanding of social identity and group conflict and her idea that, frequently, one may fall into the "unitary trap [...] a simplistic portrayal of identity group conflict as an identity-driven war of all against all" (Demmers, 2012: 23), fruit of either a presumption of link between identity and conflict or a simplistic approach to group formation that does not consider the difference between groups and organizations. Demmers focuses on ethnicity as socially constructed: covering the discussion on identity (Demmers, 2012: 18-21) defines social identity as a "relationship between the individual and the social environment" (Demmers, 2012: 21) and adopts common definitions of social categories with its two main features: rules of membership and content (characteristics and role).

In the core of her article, Demmers focuses on ethnicity and ethnic violence and describes two approaches to this "messy and confusing affair" (Demmers, 2012: 23). On one side "everyday primordialism" (Fearon and Laitin, 2000 *apud* Demmers, 2012: 25) perceiving ethnic groups as natural communities of unchangeable bonds, proclaimed in powerful narratives that stress the possibility of violent conflict, for which there is no solution but segregation. On the other hand, a constructivist approach that tends to explain the process of ethnic group formation as "imagined, constructed (...), created through social interaction (...) dynamic and changeable" (Demmers, 2012: 26): the importance of each social identity can change with time, will and location. "[S]ome categorizations are forced upon us (...) others we can adopt" (Demmers, 2012: 21).

Where Huntington identifies boundaries of the 'Clash': Western Christianity vs. Orthodox Christianity, West vs. Islam (in many ways not a geographic boundary), Arab-Islamic vs. Pagan-animist-increasingly Christian Africans, Islam vs. Orthodox, Muslims vs. Hindu, China vs. USA, Japan vs. USA (Huntington, 1993: 29-35); Demmers evaluates the connection between ethnic identity and violence, dismissing primordialism as an explanation since it presumes identity as a cause for violence. For Demmers, violence plays a major role in the formation of identities: groups are not the cause but the result of violence, either by the assumption that ethnic war is functional, i.e. planned by elites to increase group cohesion, the product of mass dynamics that generate interaction at different levels of society or the cultural product of identity. Demmers describes with further detail these two constructivist approaches to ethnicity: the instrumentalist or functionalist approach that "emphasizes the political functions of ethnic boundaries" and the culturalist or ethno-symbolic approach that looks at social meaning that can have high level of violent mobilization (Demmers, 2012: 27-28). She debates the mentioned functionalist and cultural approaches and proposes a mutual cooperation in the epistemological field that brings light to boundary functional constructions and content of cultural meanings found in ethnic groups (Demmers 2012: 31-33).

A critique from liberal perspectives

As a second reason for the 'clash' of civilizations, Huntington presents "the increasing interactions of a smaller world" and Thomas Lundén's 2015 article will present some discussion on the subject. In his article he examines the relation between religion and geopolitics with the "intention to discuss how geopolitics influences the spatial distribution of religion". With a focus on the

authoritative rules that permit or prohibit, from 1600 to 1914, members of different religion to establish in countries of the Baltic Sea, the author intends to explain how geopolitical elements such as political and market regulation, overthrow religious identity. Positioning his study at the state level and giving the market an explanatory key to religious freedom in the Baltic Sea, this author shows an idealist-optimist propensity and sees the "increasing interaction" not as a cause for conflict but as having integrating possibilities. Lundén begins by examining the Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania, with its multiple ethnic identities and tolerating faiths that permitted a republic of nobles to function as a sole country: interaction permitted peace that was only eroded by the political events that built the centralized catholic Polish nation (Lundén, 2015: 238-241). The German 'side' of the Baltic Sea is also scrutinized to conclude that Jewish establishment was permitted for political purposes of integrating conquered spaces or economic needs of market forces. On the Scandinavian shores of Denmark, Norway and Sweden religious unity was slowly transformed into religious plurality as groups of market interest arrived. On the Russian quadrant of the Baltic Sea Old Order Orthodox felt safer than in the inner Russia. Finland, a Lutheran country, received an important contingent of Russian military forces of Jewish, Catholic and Muslim faith that obliged accommodation from state policy. Lundén concludes that three aspects are linked: state territories change in extent and number, the administrative organization of the states also changes and finally religion regulation slowly tends to liberalization (Lundén, 2015: 246). Religion is not an absolute element of identity and must be observed in its link with geopolitical development, internal governance and mutual relations among states. Global interaction, in his perspective, has more cooperative aspects that 'clashing' ones.

Structural-realism viewpoints

The social change that occurs when people depart from local identities and no longer find belonging in the weakening nation-state is mentioned by Huntington (1993: 26) as the third explanation for the 'clash' of civilizations. Kurds, in many ways, incur in this group as Dahlman points out in his 2002 article based on fieldwork conducted from 1998 to 2002 on Kurdish territory (Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria) and abroad. The paper reflects the complex issue of Kurdish identity and its role in modern history. The author begins by assessing the difficulty to determine a set of characteristics of the Kurdish population: the major difficulty derives from a gap between rural and urban population but religion and language do not offer great unity. Only tribal (*ashiret*) descent and affiliation permits reasonable association. Modern age brought further misidentification: "national identities have altered Kurdish ethnic consciousness (...) gradual erosion of Kurdish identity (...) is fostered by state officials" (Dahlman, 2002: 276). History recalls how the Kurdish territory was occupied by different powers, but mainly left to administrate by its own tribal leaders and also how, in the context of the Anglo-Russian rivalry, was split into four parts: Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. Dahlman describes in four different sections, one for each of those countries, the venture of the Kurdish people. Although the path has been different in each one of them, common policies can be traced: national repression, disruption of tribal structures, group division and urban relocation of population. Kurds were given a political voice in these countries but mainly while they were allies of the national fragile politics or international regional conflicts. No large cooperation of the Kurdish population or the emerging political national groups (PKK in Turkey, KDP-I in Iran, KDP and PUK in Iraq) can be traced between borders, in general their activity concerned the national state further than transnational cooperation or efforts-gathering. Sometimes these groups were even allies of foreign countries in the regional power politics rather than Kurdish unity makers (Dahlman, 2002: 279-293). Kurdish fate was left to be determined in terms of state security that deterritorializes Kurdish population, aiming at its sense of place and kinship structures (Dahlman, 2002: 293-294). The majority of 'Kurdish Sense' now lives in the diaspora in Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Russia, Israel, France and the United States and will probably influence Kurdish identity with the resettlement's views. Since Kurds have no state entity, in the author's perspective, they are only relevant in each of the four countries state policy.

Lundén approach on the role of the Kurds at the state level, although focused in a rather structural-realist way, leaves unanswered the ethnic features of the matter but contributes to the debate on whether "social change that occurs when people depart from local identities and no longer find belonging in the weakening nation-state" (Huntington, 1993: 25) explains conflict. Thus, Lundén shows that what is left of Kurdish identity finds its path to national politics and not always in a conflicting way.

Post-colonial approaches

Huntington further offers some reflections on post-colonial West vs. non-West interaction that causes attention, although its aim is scarcely critical of the classic perspectives on the subject. Its mere mention shows a certain degree of conscience about the conflicting perspectives on the matter (Huntington, 1993: 39-41) with a reference to "torn-countries", such as Turkey and Mexico, that are uncertain about their western/non-western identity (Huntington, 1993: 41-48). This growth of civilizational consciousness in the West-East debate is presented as the fourth cause for conflict and is analysed in the interesting post-colonial reflection of Tabish Shah (2010). By analysing the travel literature of several Western travellers to Turkey, Shah exposes the consequences of the 'West' and 'East' notions in the security of ethno-religiously diverse nations. His approach is that of 'critical geopolitics' which identifies past manipulation of geography, origin versions of 'self' and 'other' that served political ends of colonialism. These manipulations identified 'self' with the western rationality and economic progress and the 'other' with eastern irrationality and aggressivety. Shah finds continuity and change in the definitions of 'East', 'West', 'Europe' and 'Other' but still identifies a need to decolonize the knowledge of eastern societies as there are many who persist in the idea of "homogeneity and assimilation as necessary" (Shah, 2010: 401) to incorporate ethno-religious diversity. By revising the travel literature of several Westerners, Shah identifies two groups of accounts. A first group tends to find incompatibility between Turkish/Eastern world and European/Western world since the "East" is "strange", "traditional" and "primitive" and the "West" is "normal", "modern", "democratic" and "developed" (Shah, 2010: 404). A second group of travellers gathers some conscience that perceptions are stereotyped and based on assumptions and monolithic notions: neither 'West' is perfectly structured, nor 'East' is absent of modernity, rationality and progress. Shah argues that the persistence of an imagined 'western identity' in the modern days of ethno-religious and cultural diversity makes no sense. Furthermore, it brings a threat to security, once dichotomies of entitlement lead to ethno-religious discrimination and violence. Shah proposes a reframing of the way western society deals with difference, deconstructing outdated and inaccurate versions of geography, history and ethnology, based on the 'self' and 'other' concepts, there is also a need to deconstruct the notions of integration, citizenship, social cohesion that feed ethno-religious conflict (Shah, 2010: 408-409), and desecuritizing identities that permit ethno-religious diverse nations.

Neoliberalism and complex interdependence analysis

The resilience of cultural characteristics, less prone to change than chosen economic or political models and the cultural affinity of economic blocs is presented as the fifth argument for the conflict but from the reading of the article of Jane Dawson, with her approach from the complex-interdependence, one could argue against such idea. In Crimea, ethnicity is not enough to generate ethnic hostility due to the impossibility of alighting ethnicity, ideology and geopolitics. Ethnicity is not the only or the major factor when it comes to motivational potential in an identity crisis. Dawson describes Crimea's crisis of identity: an ethnically mixed region with Russians, Ukrainians and Tartars; planted in the Ukrainian-Russian conflict, living in an institutional confrontation between President and Parliament with ideological features, undergoing a constitutional conflict with Ukraine (as Crimea was a province of Ukraine at the time of writing), and being an important location due to its proximity with Sevastopol in the heart of the Black Sea (Dawson, 1998: 428). Dawson describes ethnic, ideological and geopolitical cleavages of Crimea

to conclude that the impossibility to alight them led to peace: there is an ethnic diversity, but also an ideological confrontation between capitalism and the structures of the Soviet era, as well as a need to balance the geopolitical position. The impossibility to gather a consensus left no space for extreme positions and schism. Dawson writes a short but consistent article that illuminates the importance not to exaggerate the power of ethnicity in the identity process and to evaluate other factors and their interdependence.

Conclusion

Several questions emerge from the readings under review on identity, ethnicity and religion and its relationship with peace and conflict. Along the lines of this article I called into the debate five authors that present an answer to each of the five 'reasons' Huntington presents to the 'clash' of cultural, ethnic and religious entities. I find Demmers' article particularly interesting, especially for the combination of functional and ethno-symbolic approaches to ethnicity that widens the possibilities of debate with the perspectives of the other authors and pose a useful opportunity to reflect on their proposals. The authors gathered for this review article offer, from various angles, valid points to question the simple assumptions of Huntington's clashing theory. Huntington presents a valid and concise hypothesis in his 'reasons', it has the merit of bringing up the subject, but his argument is narrow if we consider the elements other authors bring into the debate. Not all the basic differences among civilizations are prone to conflict, those have their own dynamics that largely overlap civilizational statements; not all interactions of a smaller world create differences, many interactions create interdependence and cooperation; the social change that occurs when people depart from local identities and no longer find belonging in the weakening nation-state does not lead directly to conflict, people can find identities in other entities to maintain their sense of belonging; the growth of civilizational consciousness in the West-East debate can lead to more wider perspectives than obligatory violence since new perspectives of understanding and respect can be explored; lastly, the resilience of cultural characteristics, less prone to change than chosen economic or political models is definitely not a one-way ticket to war, since alone they do not justify the choice of conflict.

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