



The BIG Thinkers

Leaving Certificate Politics and Society

Huntington, Samuel



Key Concepts: power, conflict, universalism, culture, identity

Samuel HUNTINGTON



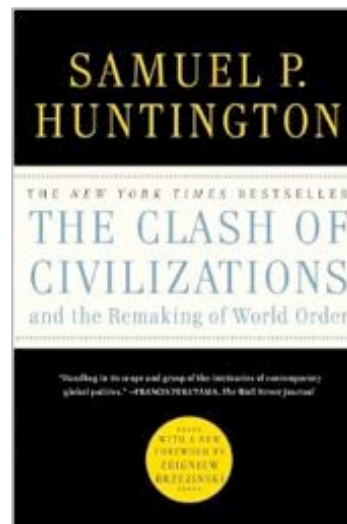
Huntington in context

Samuel Phillips Huntington was an American political scientist, government adviser and academic. He was born into a white, Anglo-Saxon protestant, middle-class family in Queen's, New York City. He was a very able student and went to Yale University aged 16, graduating in two and a half years (instead of the usual four). He earned a master's degree at the University of Chicago and a doctorate from Harvard, where he taught for many years. During the 1970s, Huntington was an

advisor to governments, both at home and abroad. During the 1980s, he became an adviser to the South African regime, which used his ideas on political reform to reform apartheid and suppress growing resistance. He assured South Africa's rulers that increasing the repressive power of the state (which at that time included police violence, detention without trial, and torture) can be necessary to effect reform. The reform process, he told his South African audience, often requires "duplicity, deceit, faulty assumptions and purposeful blindness." He thus gave his imprimatur to his hosts' project of "reforming" apartheid rather than eliminating it. His views and support for the war in Vietnam also attracted controversy and protests. As a consultant to the US State Department, he advocated pushing the rural population of South Vietnam into the cities, via a strategy of carpet-bombing and defoliating the rural lands and jungles, as a means of isolating the communist supported Viet Cong army.

Clash of civilizations

Huntington is best known for his 1996 book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* where he elaborated on the ideas he had published in an earlier article entitled 'The Clash of Civilizations?' His main thesis was that in a post-cold war world future wars would be fought not between countries, but between cultures. He argued that that, whilst in the Cold War, conflict occurred between the capitalist West and the communist East, it now was most likely to occur between the world's major civilizations. He identifies seven civilizations, and a possible eighth: (i) Western, (ii) Latin American, (iii) Islamic, (iv) Sinic (Chinese), (v) Hindu, (vi) Orthodox, (vii) Japanese, and (viii) African.



'People define themselves in terms of ancestry, religion, language, history, values, customs, and institutions. They identify with cultural groups: tribes, ethnic groups, religious communities, nations, and, at the broadest level, civilizations. People use politics not just to advance their interests but also to define their identity. We know who we are only when we know who we are not and often only when we know whom we are against.'

Samuel
Huntington



He predicted that future conflicts would arise between cultures and civilizations rather than States. 'Faith and family, blood and belief, are what people identify with and what they will fight and die for. And that is why the clash of civilizations is replacing the Cold War as the central phenomenon of global politics,' he wrote.

He argues that the West has presented pro-Western policies as positive for the entire world and that the very idea of a universal culture is a Western idea. The West must abandon the imposition of its ideal of democratic universalism saying "In the emerging world of ethnic conflict and civilizations clash, Western belief in the universality of Western culture suffers three problems: it is false; it is immoral; and it is dangerous."

Huntington observed that the spread of American pop culture did not mean the spread of Western attitudes or values. 'Somewhere in the Middle East, a half-dozen young men could well be dressed in jeans, drinking Coke, listening to rap, and between their bows to Mecca, putting together a bomb to blow up an American airliner.'

"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."

He suggests that the most serious fault line is the one separating the West from the Muslim world. The policy prescription he suggests to counter this perceived threat is to increase the power of the West to forestall any loss of the West's pre-eminence.

Huntington has been criticized for promoting Islamophobia and perpetuating an 'us versus them' mentality. In addition, he has been critiqued for neglecting to discuss the root causes of conflict and war in the modern world that often lie in economic and political structures. Although many scholars rejected Huntington's analysis as simplistic and even dangerous, others found it persuasive, especially after the attacks of September 11th 2001 and the more recent rise of Islamic extremism.

Material consulted

- The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order, 1996
- The Clash of Civilizations? 1993 can be found [here](#).
- [Samuel Huntington being interviewed about his ideas](#).
- For a critique of Huntington's ideas watch [Edward Said's lecture 'The myth of the Clash of Civilizations'](#)

'The philosophical assumptions, underlying values, social relations, customs, and overall outlooks on life differ significantly among civilizations. The revitalization of religion throughout much of the world is reinforcing these cultural differences. Cultures can change, and the nature of their impact on politics and economics can vary from one period to another. Yet the major differences in political and economic development among civilizations are clearly rooted in their different cultures. East Asian economic success has its source in East Asian culture, as do the difficulties East Asian societies have had in achieving stable democratic political systems. Islamic culture explains in large part the failure of democracy to emerge in much of the Muslim world.'

Samuel
Huntington