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Imagined civilizations?

Guest editorial by Jonathan Benthall

Two academics I revere had tangled it: Edward Said had written that it was ‘ponderously ineffective’, and I had seen Michael Gilsenan tremble as he denounced it at an anthropological meeting. So I was a little ashamed of reading it recently in a public place, as one might not care to be seen reading a novel by Jeffrey Archer.

But I found The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order absorbing, and do not think it deserves to be included in the anthropological Index librorum prohibitorum. Samuel P. Huntington does not test his hypotheses rigorously against the evidence, but then nor did some popular anthropological classics. While admitting that his thesis cannot explain every event in world politics since 1989, Huntington seeks no less than a paradigm change as described in Thomas Kuhn’s The structure of scientific revolutions. If such an attempt were successful, Kuhn would lead us to expect resistance from the dominant intellectual community. Kuhn also claimed that paradigm change changes the world we live in: there is a performative as well as a descriptive aspect to writings that hit the Zeitgeist at just the right moment. When the subject matter is, as in Huntington’s case, the grounds for actual and potential world conflict, we should at least take his model seriously, and I suggest here some reasons why anthropologists should do so.

The most pressing argument against Huntington’s thesis is that it might actually inflame conflict, but his avowed intention is to resuscitate ‘balance of power’ diplomacy.

First, Huntington’s concept of a ‘civilization’, borrowed mainly from that now outmoded historian Toynbee, is the highest-level unit of analysis below that of the human species (p.43). Clearly these are not entities in the sense that a person is an entity. But drawing attention to mixings, complexities, influences and internal conflicts, as his critics do, does not necessarily nullify the concept. If we think of these civilizations as representations mutually reinforcing one another and imperfectly tested by reality, the concept could be rescued. Fred Halliday’s Islam and the myth of confrontation (1995) is partly intended to refute Huntington, but turns out to give a masterfully analytic account of the mutual reinforcement of stereotypes between an ultra-consumerist ‘West’ and a fundamentalist ‘Islam’. Huntington is too old-fashioned to focus on representations, but if we splice onto the Huntington ‘Standard’ model such ideas as Benedict Anderson’s ‘imagined communities’ we might get a more defensible ‘Huntington Supercharged’.

Second, Huntington downplays race. Even if the ‘clash’ model might have the effect of aggravating global tensions by legitimizing them, it could be an improvement on a world divided by racist doctrines. Huntington’s model underestimates the enduring divisions of social race (as indeed those of class, gender, and age), but it also reflects a quiet victory for anti-racism, and hence indirectly for cultural anthropology.

Third, his emphasis on religions and the shared values and institutions that derive from them is a reproach to the majority of social scientists, who typically used to embrace a crude theory of secularization, but less to anthropologists, who have tended to give more weight to religions. Some, such as Marshall Sahlins and Marilyn Strathern, are looking at the examining Judaeo-Christian religions. Some, such as Marshall Sahlins and Marilyn Strathern, are looking at the unexamined Judaeo-Christian religions. Some, such as Marshall Sahlins and Marilyn Strathern, are looking at the unexamined Judaeo-Christian religions. Some, such as Marshall Sahlins and Marilyn Strathern, are looking at the unexamined Judaeo-Christian religions. Some, such as Marshall Sahlins and Marilyn Strathern, are looking at the unexamined Judaeo-Christian religions. Some, such as Marshall Sahlins and Marilyn Strathern, are looking at the unexamined Judaeo-Christian religions. 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Fourth, though Huntington’s métier as an American expert on security and strategy shows through, he is no simple-minded apostle for the West. He argues against ‘monocivilizational viewpoints’ (p.55) and ascribes to the West responsibility for the worst political ideologies, such as fascism, as well as the better ones, while all the world’s religions derive historically from the non-West (p.53-54). In his view, the West is inexorably declining too, as Oswald Spengler suggested.

Fifth, Huntington is no slave to US foreign policy. For example, commitment to Israel has been a pillar of this policy for many years. Though Huntington does not say so explicitly in his book, its implication – confirmed by the absence of Israel’s borders in his map of the world’s civilizations today (p.26-27) – is that the Israel-Palestine conflict is an acute case of ‘fault line war’ and that the high population growth rate in the Muslim world (p.116-117) threatens Israel’s long-term survival as a Jewish state despite its military power. This is the view taken by Hamas.

Sixth, Huntington’s civilizations are tribes writ large. The notion that much of ethnic and national identity is negatively defined in opposition to others has an anthropological pedigree. He is rightly criticized for using inflammatory words – ‘it is human to hate… people need enemies’ (p.130) – but replace ‘enemies’ by ‘rivals’ and we have an anthropological truism.

Seventh, Huntington’s questioning of Western pretensions to universal civilization, as manifested for instance in the discourse of human rights and parliamentary democracy (p.192-198), aligns him surprisingly with some anthropologists on the left.7

The question of the book’s predictive value is of course highly delicate. Published in 1997 (expanding an essay published in 1993), it has dignified the Islamic Resurgence with a degree of popular acceptance, and probably underpins some of what Huntington considers to be the ‘clash of civilizations’. The critical test of Huntington’s predictions is whether the book is ‘true’ or ‘false’, and this is a test that is as yet unanswerable. Organized religion is open to falsification – lacking the benefit of the ‘enemies’ by ‘rivals’ and we have an ethnographic truism. Huntington seems to have sought inspiration from, and to invert, the classical Islamic partition of the world into dar al-Islam and dar al-harb (literally ‘realm of war’, i.e., of non-believers), opposing the ‘West’ to the ‘Rest’ in a dichotomy that offends all anthropologists as intolerably crude.

If we accept that his overall model has already won a fair degree of popular acceptance, and probably underpins some US government thinking, why not test it against the evidence? First, the ‘Huntington Standard’ or positivist model, which is open to falsification – lacking the benefit of the dimension of representations, which would take us into hazier territory where it is easy to shift one’s ground.

With regard to Islam (the aspect of his book that has attracted most attention), my own research on Islamic charitable practices concludes that they have deep commonalities with Judaico-Christian traditions. Their differences – such as a reluctance to give the same degree of assistance to non-co-religionists as to co-religionists – are, I would argue, more attributable to a discrepancy in the pace of historical change than to any fundamental mismatch. Organized charity for Huntington would presumably come under the heading of the ‘commonalities of civilization’, manifesta-

1. Page references are to the 2002 paperback reprint published by Free Press.
2. In a recent article, Mahmood Mamdani strongly opposes Huntington’s book but writes: ‘Islam and Christianity have in common a deeply messianic orientation, a sense of mission to civilize the world… In the modern age, this kind of conviction goes beyond the secular, beyond the domain of doctrine to that of politics.’ (Good Muslim, bad Muslim: A political perspective on culture and terrorism, American Anthropologist 104(3), September 2002, p.768.)
3. Space does not permit consideration here of some of his more interesting subsidiary concepts. For instance, ‘kin country rallying’ to support co-religionists; ‘core states’ such as the USA, Russia and China (one of the problems with Islam being that the lack of a core state results in vigourous inter-state competition); ‘bandwagoning’ versus ‘balancing’ as national strategies; ‘hom countries’ such as Turkey, Mexico, Russia and Australia; the ‘absentee role’ that core states should not interfere in conflicts in other civilizations; the ‘mediation role’ that core states should negotiate with one another to contain fault line wars.
5. A web search through Google using the keywords ‘Soyinka Muslim’ gives access to an acrimonious personal polemic between Wole Soyinka, a devotee of the Yoruba gods, and Ali Mazrui, an African Muslim, which brings out some of these issues.

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