Every system of social inequalities conceived in violence must maintain itself by less violent means if it is to endure. Force is costly. It diverts resources from productive uses, and it reduces the productivity of resources not so diverted. Once inequalities are in place, they must be maintained by social constructs that obscure the mechanisms that reproduce them. In the medieval past, religion formed a central component of such social constructs, but in modern capitalist economies this task now falls to the social sciences. At society’s highest levels—in the universities, think tanks, and the media—the social sciences occupy a more central place than the priestly class ever did. In modern societies, the ideological task has grown more demanding, since the subordinate classes are better educated, better connected with each other, and in democracies they could overthrow the system with a vote.

The current context offers an opportunity for reexamining Samuel Huntington’s thesis of the “clash of civilizations,” which he first offered in an essay, and later, following its grand reception, developed into a sizeable book. Huntington’s thesis serves to obfuscate the global system of inequalities in power, technology, and income that has divided the world into a Core and Periphery—rich and poor countries—for more than two hundred years. I am encouraged in
my interpretation of the Huntington thesis by one very telling indicator: its immense popularity among Western intellectuals and policy pundits.2

**The Thesis Dissected**

Huntington’s thesis of a new era in global politics, starting in the 1990s, dominated by a “clash of civilizations”—especially between the West and Islam and the West and China—is embedded in a historiography of global conflicts, which is breath-taking in its simplicity.3 According to Huntington, during the first period of human history, starting from the earliest times down to 1500 CE, “contacts between civilizations were intermittent or nonexistent.”4 Huntington’s conception of civilizations before 1500 as self-contained nodules has no basis in reality; the history of mankind since quite early times has been one of nearly continuous contacts—via trade, migrations, wars, and transmission of diseases—amongst all major civilizations in the eastern hemisphere. Even the Greeks understood this interconnection quite well; they visualized the world as an oikoumenikos that included all the peoples in the inhabited parts of the earth. In Huntington’s scheme, however, an initial period of isolation was followed by a “multipolar international system” extending from 1500 to 1945 and defined by interaction, competition, wars between Western states, and wars waged by the West against other civilizations. Once again, taking a global perspective, it would appear that the central phenomenon of this period was the rise, expansion, and global dominance of capitalism, a set of violent processes, which divided the world into a dominant Core and a subjugated Periphery. The most enduring—and the most deadly—conflicts during this period occurred between the Core and Periphery.

In Huntington’s analysis, the end of the second Great War heralded a new period in global politics, the Cold War, dominated by the clash of ideologies between “mostly wealthy” societies, led by the United States, and a group of “somewhat poorer” communist
societies led by the Soviet Union. Once again, the attempt at obfuscation should be obvious. First, the communist countries were not “somewhat” but significantly poorer than the developed countries. A substantial and growing gap divided the communist countries of Eastern Europe from the developed countries, and the Asian communist countries lagged by a still greater margin. More important, the clash of ideologies during the Cold War must be seen for what it was: a clash between the interests of the Core and the Periphery. The Cold War marked a new phase in an old conflict. It was a clash between the Core and a segment of the Periphery that had broken away from the global capitalist system. Similarly, and contrary to Huntington’s claims, the end of the Cold War did not change the fundamental reality of a world divided between the Core and the Periphery. It only terminated the socialist development of a recalcitrant segment of the Periphery and reintegrated it into the global capitalist system. The post-Cold War period also led to the dismantling of interventionist development programs in most Third World countries. If the post-War era marks a new phase in global capitalism, this development stems from a new unity in the ranks of the Core countries, which has given them a degree of control over global economic arrangements they have not exercised before. During this period, the Core countries created a world government of sorts, in the guise of IMF, World Bank, and WTO. Since the end of the Cold War, this triad has succeeded in squeezing the whole world into a straightjacket designed by and for the advantage of the Core countries.

Huntington summarily dismisses conflicts between the rich and poor countries as unlikely, because the poor countries “lack the political unity, economic power, and military capability to challenge the rich countries.”5 Ironically, this statement contradicts Huntington’s own thesis of the “clash of civilizations,” which warns of clashes between the West, on one side, and Islam and China, both of which would easily qualify as poor countries. Even after decades of rapid growth, China’s per capita income in US dollars—for this figure is what matters when measuring purchasing power on
world markets—was $780 in 1999, compared to $30,600 for United States. On an average, the Islamic countries had lower per capita incomes than China.⁶ Huntington’s argument runs into a variety of other problems. He asserts that poor countries do not pose a threat because they “lack political unity” and “military capability.” Yet, if they did, it would be hard to explain Huntington’s concern about the threat of the Muslim world, fragmented into some 50 countries, nearly all quite poor. Two countries, China and India, each larger than the entire West, might soon threaten the West with no help from others. Some poor countries, although small, can also pose a threat to the West, or at least they are perceived to have this capability. The United States is building the nuclear defense shield to protect itself against attacks from these “rogue states”—most notably, Iraq, North Korea, and Iran. Indeed, American foreign policy for some time now has been aimed primarily at containing a variety of threats from poor countries.

A closer examination of the “civilizations” in Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” reveals that it is mostly a clash of races.⁷ Although Huntington does not explain what defines a civilization, what lies at its core, and how this core is preserved through changing conditions, he is quite clear about its correlates. People define their identity in terms of characteristics such as ancestry, religion, language, values, and institutions.⁸ But it is “ancestry” (alternatively, “blood” and “race”) that dominates all other characteristics. Race defines most of the civilizations on Huntington’s list: the Western (Germanic), Orthodox (Slavic), Latin American (mostly Mestizo), Sinic (yellow), Japanese (Japanese), African (black), Indian (brown), and the Caribbean (black). Islam alone does not fit this description. On the other hand, the correlation with religion is quite a bit weaker. The Western, Orthodox, Caribbean, and Latin American civilizations are all Christian; while the Japanese and Sinic are not defined by any religion, as the term is understood in the West.

An examination of the empirical relation between civilizations and states creates a different kind of problem for the Huntington
thesis. Of the six major civilizations—the Western, Orthodox, Islamic, Indian, Sinic, and Japanese—the last three are identical or nearly identical with a state. In other words, India, China, and Japan are civilizations and states. In addition, two core states—the United States and Russia—contain a third and a half of the total populations of their civilizations, leading some to treat these countries as synonymous with the Western and Orthodox civilizations. In the presence of such strong overlaps between civilizations and states, one could easily construe a straight conflict over interests—especially between the United States and China, or China and Russia—as a clash of civilizations.

Granted that different civilizations exist, why should they clash? According to Huntington, these conflicts have deep roots in our psyche. People need to define themselves, and they do so by identifying with “cultural groups: tribes, ethnic groups, religious communities, nations, and, at the broadest level, civilizations.” We then deepen our identity by differentiating our group from other groups. “We know who we are only when we know who we are not and often only when we know whom we are against (emphasis added).”

Our deeply felt need for identity leads inevitably to cultural conflicts. This two-part thesis lies at the core of Huntington’s book—we need to identify with groups, and our group identity battens on hatred of other identities—and is problematic for several reasons. The identification with groups will not always generate conflicts, which will depend on the groups with which we identify. We can define ourselves by identifying with the family, village, tribe, guild, trade union, college, town, profession, or club, but rarely does attachment to any of these primary groups need to be reinforced by hatred of other primary groups. No reason, rooted in our psyche, explains why our identification with any of these primary groups should be superseded by our commitment to larger, secondary, more distant groups, such as nation, race, or civilization. Our devotion to these secondary groups is socially constructed and cannot be the result of any existential need that is better met by socialization.
with smaller groups. Similarly, if it is human to hate, as Huntington asserts, then surely people would prefer to direct this ‘hatred’ at their primary rivals in business, politics, sports, or the work place.10

Only when we view the world from the perspective of modern European history does the obsession with nation, race, and civilization assume prominence. During the past two thousand years—and perhaps longer—empires have ranked as the most common, enduring, and powerful systems of governance across the world. More often than not these empires embraced peoples of diverse ethnicities, religions, and even races. In India, home to many rich and well-defined ethnic cultures, ethnic identities only infrequently motivated the politics of state formation.11 An Indian identity, defined by consciousness of differences from—and hatred of—Others, was never very strong until the British conquest stimulated it. Indians did not bother to give a name to their continent: The Greeks and, later, the Muslims named it.

Huntington also attributes cultural conflicts to cultural differences per se, asserting that the conflicts between Islam and the Christian West “flow from the nature of the two religions and the civilizations based on them (emphasis added).” In addition, the conflict between these two great civilizations is “fundamental” and “will continue to define their relations in the future as it has defined them for the past fourteen centuries.”12 What then are the core ideas or tendencies within these civilizations that pit them against each other? Huntington flags several sources of conflicts between Islam and Christianity: Western secularism collides with Islam’s insistence on combining religion and politics; their religions refuse to accommodate other gods; their universalistic claims collide; and their missionaries compete for converts. It is possible to contest each of these claims. Huntington regards the West and Islam as absolutes: Each has a singular and determinate “nature,” which is given at its conception and does not vary with time and place. It follows that their differences also are absolute: The two religions are irreconcilable.
Huntington’s conclusion ignores a great deal of history, however. For instance, the separation between church and state is a quite recent development that began its career with the founding of the United States. In Britain today, the Queen is not only the head of the state, she is also the head of the officially established Anglican Church. On the other hand, the tolerance that the Islamic empires granted to diverse religious tendencies within Islam and, to a lesser degree, other religions of the Book, approximated the secularism practiced in some Western countries in recent times.

Islamic and Christian claims to universalism and, more important, the means employed to achieve them, are historically determined and have evolved with time, not always in the direction of greater tolerance. In the past, Christianity viewed Islam as a false religion, one that had to be combated with force. For centuries, this belief was strong enough to mobilize waves of crusaders against the Muslims in Spain, the Levant, and North Africa. But Christianity no longer defines the West. Although most Christians may still believe that Islam is a false religion, few if any of them would enlist in crusades to extirpate it. Islamic societies, however, have moved in the opposite direction over the past century, away from the tolerance of their religion. Contemporary Islamic movements, which have emerged to resist the marginalization of Islamic societies, surpass most of the traditional schools of Islam in their rigid practice of Islam, their defensiveness, and their intolerance of other religions. The irreconcilable differences that Huntington perceives between the West and Islam resemble those that historically divided the Catholics and the Protestants—and still do in Northern Ireland. Their differences were deep, ranging from theology to ritual, language, institutions, and the separation of church and state. For some two centuries, partisans of these rival interpretations of Christianity waged incessant wars against each other, which, at their height, were far more deadly than any wars fought between Islam and Christianity. In time, however, Christians learned to live with their differences, since the alternative was too costly. In the past two hundred years,
the West has not fought any major war that had its roots in religious differences between Catholics and Protestants. A similar accommodation between Islam and the West could emerge and might not require another protracted period of conflicts.

Huntington has more weapons in his armory. “Differences in material interests,” he argues, “can be negotiated and often settled by compromise in a way cultural issues cannot.” Recent history suggests that the distinction may not be so categorical, since the savage wars the Europeans have fought in modern times were mostly about conflicts of power and material interests. He also overstates the claim that cultural differences are immune to negotiation. The Islamic empires extended a considerable amount of cultural autonomy to non-Islamic communities in their territory. In the Ottoman empire, they were organized into millets, autonomous communities with powers to regulate their lives according to their own religious laws. In sixteenth-century India, the Moghul emperor, Akbar, abolished the jizya, an Islamic tax levied on non-Muslims in lieu of military service; he even tried to launch a syncretic religion that would be acceptable to Hindus and Muslims alike. More generally, the Hindus and Muslims in India evolved a common language of discourse—Urdu—a common dress, common forms of address, and a considerable degree of tolerance for each other’s festivals and holy places.

Later, Huntington appears to negate his own thesis—that most conflicts have their source in cultural differences—when he describes the genesis of civilizational conflicts. According to Huntington, these “fault line wars” originate in the usual sources—conflicts over people, territory, resources, and the anarchy of states; religion enters into these conflicts only later as the primary rivals mobilize support among the larger population. “As violence [in fault-line wars] 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, and civilization consciousness
strengthens in relation to other identities.”

Huntington’s analysis of fault-line wars contradicts his thesis of the primacy of cultural factors in “civilizational” conflicts.

Finally, Huntington fails to explain the timing of what he thinks were civilizational clashes in the 1990s. He states that “social-economic modernization” caused these clashes. First, modernization created dislocation and alienation which, in turn, increased the need for more “meaningful identities.” Second, as modernization increased the points of contact between civilizations, growing awareness of their differences created stronger civilizational identities. Third, economic growth in Asia and population growth in Islam have revitalized cultural identities in Asia and Islam. These explanations fail on several counts. They would work if it could be shown that modernization had reached its peak, or accelerated, across all civilizations in the 1990s. Second, if modernization caused these clashes, they should be emanating from East Asia, not Islam, as Huntington claims. Third, if cultural resurgence can be caused by population growth, Africa, which has been growing faster than Islamic societies, should have taken the lead in the clashes. The Latin American population has also been growing rapidly since the 1900s and should have exploded in civilizational clashes much earlier.

The Evidence

Two sets of propositions are central to Huntington’s thesis of the clash of civilizations: one relates to such clashes generally, another to claims about Islam’s greater propensity to get into clashes. Not surprisingly, for a theory that is so flawed in its conception, these propositions do not stand up to the evidence.

The Huntington thesis claims that since 1989—as before 1945—two states are more likely to engage in wars if they belong to different civilizations; it was only during the Cold War, between 1945 and 1989, that the competition between two rival ideologies, capitalism and communism, suppressed this propensity. Huntington devotes 367 pages to developing this thesis, but the supporting evidence
remains selective and mostly anecdotal. Did he really believe that his thesis about clashes would persuade by its intuition, rooted, as it is, in the existential need for cultural identity, drawing sustenance from a steady diet of loathing for other peoples? Perhaps he knew all along that ideologies succeed by appealing to interests, not evidence.

Although Huntington’s thesis of a “clash of civilizations” after 1989 lends itself to quantification, he does not exploit this possibility. He offers one statistic on ethnic conflicts, which shows that slightly less than half of such conflicts in 1993 involved groups from different civilizations, and it is not very helpful. If he wishes to establish a break in the pattern of conflicts after 1989, he needs to compare the trends before and after this date. Jonathan Fox has undertaken such a comparison, and his findings contradict Huntington’s thesis. Fox’s comparison of all ethnic conflicts during the Cold War (1945–1989) and the period after (1990–1998), shows a modest decline in the ratio of inter-civilization conflicts to intra-civilization conflicts. We do not hear the rising tumult of civilizational clashes.

Alternatively, we might test Huntington’s thesis about the clash of civilizations by exploring if the probability of conflicts rises with cultural differences in the post-Cold War period. For this test, we would need to control for other factors that affect conflicts. Henderson and Tucker, in their study of international conflicts, identify three such factors in addition to differences in civilization: they include distance between the countries, the presence of democracy, and an index of power capabilities. Once Henderson and Tucker introduce controls for these influences, they find that cultural factors had no visible impact on the probability of wars during the post-Cold War years. Again, Huntington’s thesis of the clash of civilizations falls short.

Although the period before 1945 offers fertile ground for testing Huntington’s thesis, he shows little interest in it. In his 1993 paper, however, he claims that over the centuries “differences among civilizations have generated the most prolonged and the most violent
conflicts.” Again, history does not support this conclusion. Of 18 major wars fought by great powers between 1600 and 1945, only six involved states from two or more civilizations, and the deadliest, which caused millions of deaths, were fought among Western states. When Henderson and Tucker examined international wars between 1816 and 1945, with controls for other influences, they found that the probability of conflicts between two states was greater if they belonged to the same civilization—the opposite of what Huntington predicts.

Huntington asserts that culture, not geography, forms the basis of cooperation among nations, and, in the military field, advances NATO as the most successful example of such cooperation. He forgets that NATO is a vestige of the Cold War. It was created to defeat the Soviet Union, and not a few have questioned its utility in the post-Cold War era. More significantly, during the 35 years that preceded its formation, the countries that are at the core of NATO had fought the two bloodiest wars in human history. In the same spirit, Huntington offers the European Union as the greatest success in economic cooperation, which he attributes to the common culture of its members. While a connection may exist between culture and economic cooperation, Huntington’s conclusion fails on several counts. First, this cooperation was motivated from its outset by the threat of economic competition from the United States, another Western country, and no one has suggested that the European Union be turned into an Atlantic Union. The success of economic cooperation has better prospects among neighbors at similarly advanced levels of development than among those who share only a common culture. During the fifty years that preceded 1950, no movement existed in Europe towards a customs union, and even after 1950, the movement towards an economic union proceeded in such slow stages that it has taken fully fifty years to come to fruition. To complicate matters further, the European Union has begun to open its doors to several countries in Eastern Europe with Orthodox majorities.
Other examples of organizations that span several civilizations receive little attention or respect in Huntington’s analysis. Thus he sneeringly dismisses the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as “an example of the limits” of such organizations, and yet ASEAN has enjoyed demonstrable success over its relatively short tenure. Founded in 1967 to promote regional security, ASEAN moved towards the creation of a customs union in 1977 and a free-trade area in 1992. In recent years, it has expanded its membership from the original five to ten countries, and is already very close to achieving its goal of creating a free-trade area. In November 2001, ASEAN and China signed an agreement to create the world’s largest free-trade area within 10 years. Outside of the developed countries, the creation of a free-trade area has moved fastest amongst countries with diverse cultures.

Now consider the accusations about Islam’s “bloody borders.” Huntington asserts that Muslims “have problems living peaceably with their neighbors,” and “in the 1990s they have been far more involved in intergroup violence than the people of any other civilization.” In support, he presents various bits of data from 1992–1994 purporting to show that Muslims were disproportionately engaged in wars with other civilizations. A more careful examination of the data tells a different story. Surveying ethnic conflicts, Fox found that Islam was a party to 23.2 percent of all inter-civilizational conflicts between 1945 and 1989, and 24.7 percent of these conflicts during 1990 to 1998. These numbers roughly coincide with Islam’s share in world population, and we do not observe any dramatic rise in Islam’s share of conflicts since the end of the Cold War.

In any case, we should be careful when we talk about “bloody borders.” A hard look at the geography of civilizations soon reveals that the length of these borders varies strikingly and that Islam’s share of such borders is disproportionately large. Islam stretches from Senegal, Morocco, and Bosnia in the West to Sinjiang, Indonesia, and Mindanao in the East. This geographic sweep across the
Afro-Eurasian landmass brings Islam into contact—both close and extensive—with the African, Western, Orthodox, Hindu, and Buddhist civilizations. We must count not only the borders between Islamic countries and all others, but also the borders between often-large pockets of majority Islam within non-Islamic countries, and vice versa. If we were to add up all of these borders, Islam’s share of borders might well exceed the combined share of all others—a magnitude might help to place observations about Islam’s “bloody borders” in a less prejudicial perspective.

**September 11 and the “Clash”**

September 11 will remain a day inscribed in infamy. But does it mark the first strike in a clash of civilizations—predicted by our sage political scientist?

Samuel Huntington prevaricates, but he appears to stick to his guns. In an interview, he declared that the attacks “were not a clash of civilizations but a blow by a fanatical group on civilized societies in general.” So, it is not an attack on the United States or its policies, but an attack on “civilized societies in general,” often a synonym for the West. Other voices were more forthright, declaring that this is a clash of civilizations. Should we accept this reading of September 11—as an attack on the West, and part of an unfolding or impending war between Islam and the West? In my judgment, even the most elementary facts show that this thesis is indefensible.

The events of September 11 mark an escalation in attacks of a similar nature. The history of such attacks—starting with the 1983 attacks on US interests in Lebanon, winding through more attacks on US embassies, US military facilities, US officials, and US citizens in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Britain, Germany, Tanzania, and Kenya, and leading up to their culmination in the attacks of September 2001—reveal two unpleasant facts. In nearly all cases, the target of these attacks was unmistakably the United States. In nearly every case, these attacks were carried out by Arabs, on Arab
soil at first, then in non-Arab countries, and, eventually, on US soil. In the 1980s, the attackers were mostly Lebanese and Palestinians. Later, Egyptians and Saudis joined them.

This history establishes that the attackers were not waging war against “all civilized societies in general,” but against one in particular—the United States—with less than one-third of the population of the West. They were not waging war against the West, or the freedom, democracy, and pluralism of Western societies. The attacks were directed mostly against military and official targets, with the Lockerbie crash and the two attacks on the World Trade Center as notable exceptions. Equally important, nearly all the attackers were of Arab ethnicity. We must reject Huntington’s reading of the attacks of September 11, which, like previous attacks, have had a specific target—the United States. Even if we regard the attackers as representative of all Arab societies—a highly questionable assumption—this only pits one-sixth of Islam against less than one-third of the West. It is not exactly a clash between two civilizations. Instead, we should direct our focus to the United States and the Arab world—and to US policies in the Middle East which have mediated the relations between the two.

**Concluding Remarks**

Why has the Huntington thesis dominated public discourse in the West despite its weak theoretical foundations, the lack of empirical support for its most important predictions, and its frequent descent to espousal of hatred as the necessary basis of cultural identity?

This question may be answered with a story from Mulla Nasruddin, an enigmatic character in the sufi folklore of the Islamic world, at once funny, unpredictable, enigmatic, and always revealing. On one occasion, the Mulla borrowed a large cooking pot from his neighbor. When he returned the pot a few days later, he placed a smaller pot inside the larger one. His neighbor reminded
the Mulla that he had borrowed only one pot, to which the Mulla replied, “Oh that’s a baby pot. While your pot was with me, it gave birth to a baby.” The neighbor asked no further questions. Several days later, the Mulla borrowed another pot from the same neighbor. This time, however, he chose not to return it. When the neighbor asked for his pot, the Mulla explained that he could not have it—his pot had died. Visibly upset, the neighbor expostulated, “Do you take me for a fool. Pots don’t die.” The Mulla answered: “If it could have a baby, why can’t it die?”

This story illuminates aspects of the nature of ideology, although there are other ways of reading the Mulla’s antics. Our capacity to believe narratives, even quite ridiculous ones, depends on how well they serve our individual and collective interests. Not a few of the stories social scientists have constructed about race, climate, culture, civilizations, free markets, or free trade, although thickly interwoven with logic, rhetoric, mathematics, and statistics, are equally ridiculous, if only they could be seen in their true colors. But they endure because they serve powerful interests and because these powerful interests can employ a legion of scholars who willingly—although often unknowingly—trade the prestige of their scholarship for a good job, good pay, and the accolades of their bosses.

Huntington’s “clash” conjures up images of Islamic vandals attacking cherished Western values: freedom, democracy, and secularism. It tells us we are in a conflict with an age-old adversary: it is our crusade against their jihad. Once we hijack these images, we succeed in obscuring the real issues about the system of global inequities and the structural violence it has perpetrated daily, routinely, for more than two hundred years. It obscures questions about America’s foreign policy in the Middle East and about the “blowback” from that policy. It mobilizes the approval ratings, which then allow us to deal with the “blowback” with more violence. If this pattern persists, the twenty-first century will return the West and Islam to the twelfth century, when we did fight wars over religion.
NOTES


2. A quick search in google.com showed 12,600 citations which included both Samuel Huntington and ‘clash of civilizations.’


9. The quotes in this paragraph are from Huntington, The Clash of Civilizations, 1997, p. 21. On page 20, Huntington also approvingly quotes this passage from Michael Dibdin’s novel, Dead Lagoon, “Unless we hate what we are not, we cannot love what we are.” In another passage, Huntington asserts, “For self-definition and motivation people need enemies: competitors in business, rivals in achievement, opponents in politics” (The Clash of Civilizations, 1997, p. 130).


11. The weakness of ethnic consciousness in most of Asia and Africa proved a great advantage to the colonizing Europeans: The colonists could hire Asian and African soldiers to conquer their own peoples.


15. We find a specific example of this in Huntington’s comments on the Bosnian conflict. On the one hand, he claims that this was a fault-line war. On the other hand, he acknowledges that “Bosnian Muslims were highly secular in their outlook, viewed themselves as Europeans, and were the strongest supporters of a multicultural Bosnian society and state” (Huntington, The Clash of Civilizations, 1997, p. 269).


A Clash of Civilizations? Nonsense