

**FURTHER REFLECTIONS ON SAMUEL P.  
HUNTINGTON’S “CLASH OF CIVILIZATION” AND  
CONTEMPORARY GLOBAL POLITICS**

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**Abstract**

When civilizations clash or encounter one another, it is a general expectation that one of them will necessarily influence or even dominate the other. This has been the principal character of the advent of Euro-Western civilizations across regions of the world such as Africa, Asia and Latin America. Whereas previous studies have been able to detail how this influence has affected the regions economically, socially, environmentally and politically, this study takes the discourse further to understand how the contact of civilizations can be useful for comprehending contemporary relations in the international community. This study uses the ideas of Samuel P. Huntington as a theoretical framework for showing how civilizations have shaped and influenced global politics in contemporary times. When the proposal of Huntington is assessed from the perspective of how Western civilization has influenced Africa and Latin America especially, three crucial theses are noticeable. First, is the point that Western civilization seeks to dominate or exterminate and then replace non-Western civilizations in the latter’s domain. Second, non-Western cultures are usually drained of their economic resources and minerals in the name of civilization and colonization. Third, the influence of the West in contemporary international relations is waning, and this is one of the reasons why the place of countries like China in contemporary global politics is colossal and really influential in places where Western civilizations used to have unparalleled influence. Following

these three theses, this research claims that when one considers the interplay among the civilizations of the world, Huntington's analysis is penetrative and helpful in making sense of how they reflect in contemporary world politics.

**Keywords:** China, Civilization, Euro-American, Global Politics, Samuel Huntington

## **Introduction**

In this study, the overriding aim is to provide critical analysis of the idea of civilization in the light of how it plays out in contemporary international relations among nation-states in the world. The role that the ideas of Samuel Huntington play in comprehending the idea of civilization shall also be critically explored to see how relevant they can be among nation-states. I am convinced that Huntington's approach to the discourse is very useful in making sense of the issues at play among nation-states

To be able to argue for the above claim, this study begins with an exploration of the meaning of civilization. This section looks at the idea of civilization from the angle of both the colonized and colonizer within the context of some select parts of the world where civilization is closely-knitted with the idea of colonization. Specifically, civilization was generally conceived by the dominance of European ideas over those of other peoples. There is also an intra-tussle over who wields the more advanced civilization among Euro-American states. In this regard, Francophone Africa, Lusophone Africa and Anglophone Africa possess radically opposing ideas as to how to order their postcolonial realities following French, Portuguese and English influences. In Latin America, for instance, the tussle is between Spanish and Portuguese heritage. These will be given brief attention as a way of providing a detailed analysis of the idea of civilization in the next section. In the second section, I turn to the ideas of Samuel P. Huntington by looking at the consequences of the impact that civilizations have on one another to see whether or not his theory is relevant for comprehending contemporary relations in the international community. In the third part, the viability and reliability of Huntington's revelations on the clash of civilizations

will be proved valid with examples from contemporary relations in the international community. The fourth part concludes this discourse.

### **A Brief Analysis of the Concept of Civilization**

In normal usage, “a civilization is a complex human society that may have certain characteristics of cultural and technological development” (CAYNE 1992, 219). To deeply comprehend the idea of ‘civilization’, it is important to begin with its etymology. Etymologically, the word ‘civilization’ comes from the Latin word ‘civitas’ or ‘city’ (VIOLATTI 2014, 1). This is why the most basic definition of the word “civilization” is “a society made up of cities.” But early in the development of the term, anthropologists and others used “civilization” and “civilized society” to differentiate between societies they found culturally superior (which they were often a part of), and those they found culturally inferior (which they referred to as “savage” or “barbaric” cultures) (NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC 2022, N.P).

More so:

...[M]ost anthropologists agree on some criteria to define a society as a civilization. First, civilizations have some kind of urban settlements and are not nomadic. With support from the other people living in the settlement, labour is divided up into specific jobs (called the division of labour), so not everyone has to focus on growing their own food. (HENDRIKSON 1997, N.P)

In addition, it is also true that:

From this specialization comes class structure and government, both aspects of a civilization. Another criterion for civilization is a surplus of food, which comes from having tools to aid in growing crops. Writing, trading, artwork and monuments, and development of science and technology are all aspects of civilizations. (NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC 2022, N.P)

Nevertheless, there:

Are many societies that scholars consider civilizations that do not meet all of the criteria above. For example, the Incan Empire was a large civilization with a government and social hierarchy. It left behind a wealth of art, and had highly developed architecture—but no written language. This is why the concept of “civilization” is hard to define; however, it is still a helpful framework with which to view how humans come together and form a society. (GALEANO 1997, 81)

What can be seen from the above is that there is the tendency for one civilization to see itself as the universal and absolute form of civilization that is to be used as the yardstick for other civilizations. This is the case when the European civilizations clashed or encountered places like Africa, Latin America and even Asia.

The colonization of the African continent dramatically disrupted African ways of life and replaced African values with mostly European values. For instance, when the English natives applied the principle of association, their French counterparts applied the principle of assimilation (HEYWOOD 2014). This interplay of European civilization with the serenity of Africa has inevitably filtered into lingual colonization.

Now, it is the case that the linguistic expression of a people is a defining aspect of that group of people. Language is a great weapon with which mankind can carry out socio-political, economic and technological exploits. It is the distinguishing mark that differentiates human beings from other types of animals, and it possesses an empowering potential that any nation, culture or tribe wishing to be relevant cannot do without it (ODUH 2004). Language is the soul of any culture, the heart of the environment, and the spirit that motivates and directs people’s life. The power of language is better expressed in the words of Njoku; “[E]very man, even the finest thinkers is a slave to language, particularly, the language he has been brought” (NJOKU 2000, N.P). Corroborating this, William Lycan (2008) holds that language is like a bank or museum where

each ethnic group has deposited all it has built up and accumulated in the way of mental and material tools, as well as memories and resources of imagination. Language is the heart of every culture. It embodies the culture and values of a people. People who have lost their language have lost a significant chunk of their culture and identity. This is the outright effect of the idea of civilization on the African continent.

With the idea of civilization briefly considered in the light of how it functions for the peoples whose cultures and civilizations were conquered by the European order, it is now important to turn to the thoughts of Samuel Huntington in order for the reader to grasp the ways through which one can understand the politics underlying contemporary international relations.

### **When Civilizations Clash: Further Reflections on Samuel Huntington**

Samuel Huntington is one of the foremost influential scholars in the field of international relations and politics in the last century. In this research, I will consider his studies on the interaction among state actors in the international community. I will closely explore his distinction between the instrumentalist and primordialist accounts of what happens when civilizations clash or encounter one another.

In his work's opening pages, he says, "we need a map that both portrays reality and simplifies reality in a way that best serves our purpose" (HUNTINGTON 1996, 21). In the same vein, he also cites a "multi-directional interaction that is replete among all civilization" (HUNTINGTON 1996, 53). He is however confident that "global communications are dominated by the West" (HUNTINGTON 1996, 59). Realizing that the encounter with Western cultures has continued to command agitations among non-Western cultures, Huntington provided two principal motivations for these continued tensions and conflicts replete in the regions that have clashed with the dominant and influential Western tradition. These are the Primordialist account and the Instrumentalist account.

The proponents of the primordialist account argue that "ethnic groups and nationalities exist because there are traditions of belief and action towards primordial objects such as biological

features and especially territorial location” (GROSBY 1994, 168). The kinship system is adopted between members of an ethnic group in the primordialist representation. In this direction, Donald L. Horowitz argues that “kinship makes it possible for ethnic groups to think in terms of family resemblances” (HOROWITZ 1984, 57). Similarly, Huntington claims that cultural identities are very important in our understanding of the future world order. If this idea is brought to bear in relation to spates of terrorist activities, it is not too difficult to discern that it is not only across religious lines that these terrorist activities derive their motivations but across cultural lines as well. Huntington projects that “the great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflicts will be cultural” (HUNTINGTON 1996, 22). From what we have said so far, terrorist activities can be viewed along ethnic lines and may not necessarily be hinged on religious motivations. It must take cognizance of the role played by civilization, which involved the introduction of European Christianity or a distortion of the original religious culture of the civilization being encountered. The primordialist account, it must be said, is not specific to only Huntington. Grosby Stephen (1994) and Horowitz Donald (1984) also share this perspective too.

For the instrumentalist approach to conflicts that persists following the interplay between civilizations, there is a starkly different view from what primordialists believe. This approach seeks to explain conflicts as representative of the actions of community leaders “who used their cultural groups as sites of mass mobilization and as constituencies in their competition for power and resources, because they found them more effective than social classes” (SMITH 2001, 54). The claim of the instrumentalist theorists runs counter to the claims of the primordialist theory. This is because, for the former, conflicts cannot be explained from the ethnic perspective alone. There must be some political figures or heads that stand to gain from the conflicts, and, hence, employ various ways through which they can perpetuate the existing status quo for their benefit. This essay believes that the second political motivation for terrorist activities and conflicts says more about the human condition. For instance, the Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab insurgents do not conform to the primordialist theory as the terrorist activities

carried out by these groups often affect even their kinsmen and/or those practicing the same religion. The instrumentalist account gives a more encompassing vision of reality on the subject as it is highly likely that some leaders are using religion as a background to launch and justify their evil deeds. From this angle, it is clear that another way of conceiving the motivations of grievances following the clash of civilizations makes the entirety of Huntington's analyses reflective of contemporary international relations.

Despite Huntington's conviction that the West is dominant and has impacted several civilizations, it is still true for him that the dominance is dropping. He is of the outlook that Western countries are declining in relevance in international relations in contemporary times. As Huntington argues:

The current Western decline is a very slow process and is not an immediate threat to World powers today; Decline of power does not occur in a straight line; it may reverse, speed up, or pause; and the power of a state is controlled and influenced by the behaviour and decisions of those holding power. (HUNTINGTON 1996, 96)

Following this, Huntington "discusses the new structure of civilizations as centered around a small number of powerful core states. Culture commonality legitimates the leadership and order-imposing role of the core states for both member state and core external powers and institutions" (1996, 156). As noted correctly by Hollie Hendrikson:

Examples of core states are France and Germany for the E.U. Their sphere of influence ends where Western Christendom ends (1997). In other words, civilizations are strictly bound to religious affiliation. Huntington argues that the Islamic civilization, which he identified earlier in the book, lacks a core state and is the factor that disallows these societies to successfully develop and modernize. (1997, N.P)

In the final analysis, Huntington strongly maintains that “the West clashing with another civilization is the greatest threat to world peace, and international order” (1996, 321). Hollie Hendrikson discovers from the work of Huntington that “[e]xternal challenges include the emerging cultural identities in the non-Western world. Internal challenges include the erosion of principle values, morals, and beliefs within Western culture” (1997, N.P). Speaking on the possibility of a multicultural world, Huntington adds that “[a] multicultural world is unavoidable because [a] global empire is impossible. The preservation of the United States and the West requires the renewal of Western identity” (1997, 318). As a result, “[t]he ability for the West to remain a global political power, it needs to adapt to increasing power and influence of different civilizations” (HENDRIKSON 1997, 319).

From the preceding, Huntington’s argument shows how conflicts arise due to the consequences of clashing civilizations, which should be considered seriously in the discourse on international relations. Sadly enough, Huntington’s argument for a multicultural world has not yet been taken seriously in the literature on contemporary international relations as this research aims to do. In the next section, I will employ Huntington’s ideas on clashing civilizations, and the impact of Western civilization upon their regions in ways that affect contemporary studies of international relations among contemporary relations in the international community.

### **Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations” and its Plausibility for Contemporary International Relations**

From what Huntington says about the impact of the clash of Western civilization with other civilizations, it can be noted that this has implications for understanding contemporary international relations. First, almost all nation-states believe that their encounter with Western civilization has been detrimental and economically draining (see GALEANO 1997). Second, the influence of the West in international relations is dwindling or even waning as a result of the influence that China and other Asian economies pose. These revelations will now be considered in the works of some scholars.

The negative influence of Western civilization has had a direct influence on the educational system and language use in Africa. The effects of the European lingual colonization of Africa are obvious in our society. It has created, and is still creating, havoc in African socio-cultural heritage through their forceful subjugation to embrace the foreign language of their colonial masters. This is why there is truth in the claim that “African societies have to a large extent been shaped and influenced by their colonial past” (ODUH 2004, N.P). This idea of civilization being mediated by the West is one of the reasons why the question of identity continues to elude the African continent. This is also the case in Latin America too (GALEANO 1997). The influence of European civilization in Latin America can be discerned in the words of Puerto Rican sociologist, Ramon Grosfoguel, who argues thus:

We went from the [sixteenth-century] characterization of ‘people without writing’ to the eighteenth century and [nineteenth-century] characterization of ‘people without history,’ to the [twentieth-century] characterization of ‘people without development’ and more recently, to the early [twenty-first] century of ‘people without democracy.’ (2007, 214)

When talking about the effect of the categorization of Latin Americans by the West, Cisneros Cesar Puebla thus asserted that “the only way of knowing was to eliminate, subordinate and/or oppress our differences from the Other...the narrative of modernity needs the notion of “primitives” to create the spatial colonial difference and define the identities of supposed superior and inferior human beings” (2013, 396).

When talking about the drop in the influence of the West in contemporary international affairs, it has been stated that the West “is intellectually exhausted and fatigued” (CHIMAKONAM 2019, 11). It is, then, imperative for the non-Western states to disinter their indigenous epistemologies, which, inadvertently, can serve as a dais for some of the challenges faced globally. Speaking on the cerebral lassitude of the West, Bonaventura de Souza Santos states:

Historically, the journey of reason has stalled in Western philosophy, when in the centuries following the 18th century, actors engrossed themselves in the error of supposing that reason has reached its highest manifestation in Greek-born Western thought; that beyond Western thought, there is no and never will again be a better manifestation of reason. In the glory of this delusion, actors almost unanimously and, without any form of logical justification, embraced the assumption that any claim to a manifestation of reason in any world at all, actual or possible, must not lack Western authenticity. (2016, 475)

It is this universalism – which is Greek-born or manufactured in Europe and, by extension, America, is the archetype or paragon for civilization – that has motivated the extreme, domination and expropriation of the global south on all fronts. The consequence is nuanced but not perpendicular – the West has tolerated, fundamentally, every aspect of her identity and existence to be neologized when nearly every of her episteme can be branded as subaltern.

As correctly noted by Huntington that the influence of the West in global politics and relations is waning, China's influence cannot be dismissed as a validation of this understanding. If this were not true, the World Politics Review would not have demonstrated that:

As much as any other single development, China's rise over the past two decades has remade the landscape of global politics. Beginning with its entry into the World Trade Organization in December 2001, China rapidly transformed its economy from a low-cost "factory to the world" to a global leader in advanced technologies. Along the way, it has transformed global supply chains, but also international diplomacy, leveraging its success to become the primary trading and development partner for emerging economies across Asia, Africa and Latin America. (WORLD POLITICS REVIEW 2021, N.P)

Indeed, elsewhere, it has been found that:

China's growing impact therefore raises the central question [of] whether it will uphold the very order that enabled it to rise to prosperity and eminence. Will it become a stakeholder producing global public goods in a "liberal order" once created under American leadership? Ironically it is now the America of the Trump Administration that is challenging central elements of that order: in the economic field by resorting to protectionism, in the area of global commons by withdrawing from the climate policy of the Paris Accord, in the field of security by withdrawing from the non-proliferation policy of the nuclear deal with Iran, indeed, by questioning multilateralism as a core principle. (KAISER 2019, N.P)

What needs to be said, however, is that:

[A]s an ancient civilization, China has always kept a close eye on the development of thoughts and cultures around the World. The opening up of China does not only mean the opening up of its economy, but also the opening up to the various ideas of different civilizations and ethnic cultures, learning essential elements from world civilizations. The Chinese civilization itself is a mixture, with elements coming from different cultures, religions and ethnicities, which results in its richness. Chinese people advocate the fusion between different civilizations and cultures, and are against their mutual isolation, hatred and separatism. (Wang 2010, 650)

All these are the reasons why I believe that the proposal of Huntington concerning the ways that civilization shapes our understanding of contemporary international relations is commendable.

## Conclusion

In this research, the ideas of Huntington concerning civilization as explained in his popular work *The Clash of Civilizations* has been used to take a critical look at the idea of international relations in contemporary times. By assessing the thesis of Huntington (1996) on civilization in some regions in Africa, Latin America and Asia, this research has been able to deduce that the impact of Western civilization on these non-Western civilizations has usually been politically and economically traumatic for them. Incidentally, most of them, especially those in Latin America and Africa, have yet to recover from this encounter. Another interesting deduction from the idea of Huntington that bears on contemporary international relations is connected with the discovery that the influence of these Western nations is declining. The rise and influence of China in the global political economy have been used to endorse this position. In the final analysis, this research maintains the conviction that when one intends to look at the idea of civilization, paying attention to Huntington's (1996) ideas on the subject, it is easy to see that his analysis is so penetrative that it commands attention even in contemporary international relations. As a contribution, this work argues that there is a need for Nigeria and other African countries to look inward and explore the inherent values and ideals of the continent that can serve as templates for the advancement of the continent. It must be borne in mind that before the advent of colonial and missionary activities, all African societies had their native civilizations which had sustained their ways of life. These indigenous ways can be reawakened to suit the contemporary needs of African countries. Finally, as a recommendation for further studies, other scholars may want to explore and bring to the fore the indigenous socio-political and economic ideals of African societies and how they can be relevant to the contemporary era.

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