

Assessment of the clash of civilizations politics essay



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Huntington (1993) argues in his well-known theory about the clash of civilizations that the future conflicts in the world will be between civilizations, most especially along the fault lines of these civilizations. He identifies seven or eight civilizations, namely the Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin-American and possibly the African civilization. This paper will first examine the arguments Huntington employs in favour of his thesis and the critique formulated on this. The second part will look deeper into the research on war causation to look if conflicts can indeed be explained by intercultural differences.

2. Huntington and his critics (300-500)

The first argument in favour of the civilization thesis is that, according to Huntington (1993, p. 25), differences among civilizations are basic. The differences can be found in amongst others history, culture and religion. Many critics do not agree with this argument, arguing that the division of civilizations would be imprecise and that Huntington is generalizing too easily. Huntington neglects the diversity which exists the world nowadays (Perry, 2002; Veer, 1999; Esposito, 2003). Perry (2002, p. 3) gives an example that neither religion nor alphabet can justify the differences between the Western and Latin American civilization. Another argument is from van der Veer (p. 2), who acknowledges that religion is important when distinguishing civilizations, but that this also counts for nation-states. That Huntington chooses for civilizations and neglects the importance of nation-states is a short-coming according to van der Veer (1999, p. 2), especially because the two world wars were between nation-states within the same

civilization. Furthermore, there have been many other conflicts within the same civilization (Iraq-Iran; Kuwait-Iraq).

The second argument Huntington (1993, p. 25) gives is that world is becoming smaller, so that interactions between people of different civilizations are increasing. This creates consciousness and awareness of the differences between civilizations and can also lead to clashes. According to Perry (2002, p. 4) this argument is slippery, because Huntington is referring to one trend happening in many European countries today but which is not present everywhere in the world. He is referring to the tensions between immigrants and natives caused by immigration to western countries. Besides, according to van der Veer (1999, p. 8), this trend does not per se increase feelings of civilizations but can also increase feelings of nationalism or other forms of identity.

Thirdly, the nation state as source of identity will weaken due to processes of economic modernization and social change. These processes throughout the world separate people from their local identities and instead increase religion as a source of identity. Religion unites people across borders and, as religion being an important characteristic of civilization, civilizations will become more important (Huntington, 1993, p. 26). However, critics argue that modernization could also lead to a decrease of religion instead of an increase (Veer, 1999, p. 2). This can be seen in the EU nowadays, in which less and less people go to the church. Besides, modernization led in the past to increased feelings of nationalism, and not to feelings of civilization (Muller, 2008).

The fourth point Huntington (1993, p. 26/27) makes is the dual role of the West, which is at the moment at the peak of its power but at the same time the period is characterized by a return to the roots in Non-Western civilizations. According to critics, this assumption is also too oversimplified, as in each country there are pro-western and anti-western individuals. Besides, the last years have showed a growing interest in the West among the mass population. Immigration towards Western countries is because people hope to find better lives in there, and they wish that their countries become like Western countries (bron).

Fifthly, cultural features are less mutable than political and economic ones. This means that they are also more difficult to overcome. It is hard to change someone's ethnicity and religion (Huntington, 1993, p. 27). However, according to Muller (2008), this does not necessarily lead to a clash. As seen in the past, different ethnicities lived peaceful together in empires without conflicts between them. Furthermore, Huntington's arguments imply that cultural features are primordial, which means that features are a cultural given and a natural affinity. Besides, he does not make a clear difference between civilizations and ethnicities. According to constructivist theories cultural features are not like kinship sentiments, they are constructed and it is thus possible to change them (Rubenstein & Crocker, 1994, p. 118; Oberschall, 2000, p. 982/983).

The last argument is that economic regionalism is increasing which will be most visible with economic blocs. According to Huntington, economic regionalism may succeed only when it is rooted in a common civilization, a good example of this would be the EU (Huntington, 1993, p. 27). However, <https://assignbuster.com/assessment-of-the-clash-of-civilizations-politics-essay/>

nowadays it is not so obvious that the EU is regarded as a success, taking into account the financial problems in Greece and Ireland.

3. War causation (750-1500)

Although Huntington is convinced that the future wars will be between civilizations, the research on war and conflict causation shows different findings. As already seen in the previous section of this paper, the two world wars of the last century were between countries within the same civilization (WW I and WW II). Also the majority of conflicts were within civilizations, which implies more inter-ethnic conflicts (Fox, 2005, p. 448) Also the Islamic civilization has seen many conflicts, for example the Iran-Iraq war and the war between Iraq and Kuwait. These conflicts show that it is not per se about cultural differences, but about national interests. But also conflicts between different religions can have a false image. An example is the conflict in Northern Ireland between Catholics and Protestants, in which political and socio-economic issues and grievances are more important than religion itself. This also counts for 'Islamic-Christian conflicts' in Sudan, Lebanon and Bosnia. From the top it looks like a conflict about religion, however at the ground other issues than religion are more important (Veer, 1999, p. 7; Esposito, 1999, p. 228/229). Furthermore, many of the terrorists attacks in the last decade have been against Muslims in Muslim states. Tensions between Shi'i and Sunni are still there, and also tensions around the Kurds and other ethnic Muslim groups (Fox, 2005, p. 447). Academics in the field of war causation have much critique on Huntington's thesis, because there are other important causations for war which he ignores. In this part the following question will be answered: Are ethnic or cultural differences a

driver of war, or are there others causations? First other theories of war causation will be discussed and at the end there will be reflection to Huntington's theory.

3. 1 Ethnic and cultural differences as a driver of war

Explanations of conflict by ethnic differences is a popular topic in the war causation theories nowadays. However, it is not only popular but it also received much critique.

Since the end of the Cold War the world has seen many 'ethnic' conflicts. To name just a few: Tutsi's and Hutus in Rwanda, Abkhazians and South-Ossetians in Georgia, Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan and Kurds in Turkey.

In the debate about the ethnic differences as a driver of war, there is one group of scholars that sees these differences as the main driver. These can be called the primordialists. The primordialists see ethnicity as a 'given': people are born with it. Different ethnicities can be seen everywhere in the world, the world exists of different traditions, cultures, religions, norms and values (Baumann, 1999, p. 59).

Furthermore the world exists of inequalities. Mostly these inequalities run parallel with different ethnicities mentioned before. In other words, inequalities are caused by different ethnicities, because different ethnicities exist just because they are there. The inequalities cause conflicts between different ethnicities. Clashes and conflicts between ethnicities and cultures are thus unavoidable (Baumann, 1999, p. 61-62). Also Huntington can be regarded as a primordialist, because he sees no other option than a clash

between civilizations. A clash will occur, just because different civilizations and cultures are there.

The second group of scholars are the constructivists. They argue that ethnicity is being viewed as a ' cogent existential reality', which is a process of reification (Baumann, 1999, p. 61-62). Reification is when an abstract belief or idea is taken for granted as being real. Something which in fact is not real, is being treated and viewed as real, just like ethnicity (Baumann, 1999, p. 63). According to the constructivists ethnicity is made by mankind and it is socially constructed.

Baumann (1999, p. 64) gives a clear example of how ethnicity should be regarded: it can be compared with wine, which is made of natural ingredients. But these natural ingredients do not make wine themselves. The ingredients need to be added to each other and they need to ripe. In the end, a wine will have different flavours depending on a certain context. Also ethnicity exists of different natural bonds which do not in themselves create ethnicity. It needs economic and political interests in order to work in everyday life. Furthermore it needs social conditions, because the ethnicity needs to make sense for the people. Furthermore, ethnicity has also different meanings related to various social settings (Baumann, 1999, p. 64).

So in other words, ethnicity is a people's creation based on natural products and not a natural product on its own (Eriksen, 1993, p. 16; Barth, 1998, p. 15).

So although ethnicity is being viewed by many academics like Huntington as something absolute and a natural given, in fact it is not because it is socially
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constructed. People can change their identity (Eriksen, 1993). For the explanation of war this has consequences, because if ethnicities are constructed, clashes between ethnicities could be avoided. There should be some other forces which cause war and feelings of ethnicity. The next part will deal with some of these other theories.

3. 2 Other explanations of war

Greed: economic factors

One group that does not agree with Huntington's Clash of Civilizations is the group who argue that economic factors are the main drivers of conflict (Collier, 2000). They see greed as the important cause for war (Collier, 2000; Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). Economic incentives make rebellion possible and there are groups with economic power who tend to gain from the continuation of the conflict. This has all to do with the rational choice paradigm, conflict gives rebels the opportunity to enrich themselves (i. e. rebels are rational) (Bulte, 2009, p. 2).

When looking at the ongoing conflicts in the world nowadays, it becomes clear that in many cases economic aspects indeed play an important role: Colombia, Mexico, Congo, Afghanistan, Sudan, Iraq, etc. All are cases in which drugs, oil or natural resources are (leading) factors in the war.

This leads us to the resource curse, which implies that the availability of resources would increase the risk of conflict (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004).

Resources in a country are associated with 1) a slower economic growth; 2) violent civil conflict; and 3) undemocratic regimes types (Bulte, 2009, p. 2).

An important aspect of the greed theory is Cramer's (2002, p. 1857) point of view that capital and capitalism is an international phenomenon. He says that none of the contemporary civil wars can be explained without the magnitude of the interests and activities of international capital linkages. Economic powers intervene when they can get profit out of it. It is no surprise that the Middle East has seen so many conflicts in which the U. S. was involved. Oil and natural resources are main drivers to intervene and main drivers for conflict.

Grievances: inequality

Another group that does not agree with Huntington's thesis is the group that focus on the explanation of conflict by grievance. Grievance is – in contrast to greed – rooted in a behavioural paradigm and emphasized by relative deprivation, inequality and social exclusion (Bulte, 2009, p. 2).

The definition of relative deprivation is the perceived gap between people's value expectations and their value capabilities – that is, the discrepancy between what people think they ought to get from society and what they believe they will actually obtain (Schock, 1996, p. 101; Gurr, 1970). When people feel they cannot obtain what they want, people feel that they suffer from inequality. The feeling of inequality leads to frustration which may lead to aggression and violence. This happens mainly with people who suffer from social exclusion, for example an ethnic minority (Gurr, 1970).

However, critique on the grievances theory is that it does not explain how the people get mobilized. Therefore, political factors should be taken into account.

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Political factors

The last group of theories that will be discussed is the group that explains conflicts by state (trans)formations, weak states and democracies, i. e. the political context. They argue that there is more chance on violence during a period of democratisation than in a full authoritarian or a full democratic regime. This means that when a state is changing from an autocracy to a democracy, the state is in transition and this increases the chance on war. In a transition period a situation of social change, institutional weakness and threatened interests arises. This can produce a political impasse for getting to democracy: it becomes difficult to form stable political coalitions and to gain sufficient support for power (Mansfield & Snyder, 1995, p. 26).

Some add to this that not only transition can explain the level of civil war, but also the degree of democracy (Hegre et al, 2001, p. 42/43). They state that semi-democracies are unstable, because they are partly open yet somewhat repressive: a combination that invites protest, rebellion and other forms of civil violence (Hegre et al, 2001, p. 33). Political participation is ineffective but mobilization is possible. Potentially effective violent protest is thus selected to oppose the government (Schock, 1996, p. 124/125).

4. Conclusion

This paper discussed Huntington's theory about the clash of civilizations and to what extent this theory find its support in research on war causation.

Huntington is right to a certain extent, that future wars will be more and more between different cultures. However, the explanation of this statement and a great understanding of what is happening in the world is very
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important. Clashes between different cultures do not happen just because different cultures are there. Clashes between cultures happen because of a certain context in which they exist and because of certain forces which influence a conflict. These can be economic aspects, feelings of inequalities or the political context. All should be taken into account in order to understand future conflicts.

Furthermore it is necessary to say that although Huntington can be right that clashes between different cultures will occur, this does not have to be per se between civilizations. It makes more sense that conflicts happen between ethnicities or nations, also within the same civilizations. The concept of civilizations is too generalized.

Only time can learn us what will happen in the future.

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