

A critique of samuel p. huntington's book, clash of civilizations and the remakin...

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Samuel Huntington offers a unique perspective on international relations with his paper “A Clash of Civilizations?” In this paper Huntington outlines the changes he believes have occurred and will occur in the international world at the time of his writing. In his writings he boldly states that the central source of conflict in the world will no longer be over ideology or economy. That is, there will no longer be wars or violence between states based on the policy or the condition of the economy of other states. Rather, Huntington states that “[t]he great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural” (22). His paper then goes on to argue why he believes this to be true and, further, that civilizations, rather than just states, is where the principal conflicts of world politics will ensue. At first glance, the statements that Huntington makes seem to have a constructivist line of thinking, but should his paper be considered a constructivist analysis? I am inclined believe that Huntington’s paper has elements of a constructivist interpretive understanding that is based in the realism image because of the assumptions that both realists and constructivists make.

First, what parts of the realism image does Huntington most closely align with? In his paper, Huntington describes that “[n]ation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs” (22). This is directly in line with the realist thinking that states are the most important actors in international relations. The other part of realist thinking that Huntington touches on is with national and international security. For a large part of the paper Huntington spends time addressing conflicts, even if they are not specifically violent or war-filled, and I believe that he spends so much time on the conflicts

because he aligns partially with the realist image of international relations and particularly with the assumption that national security is of utmost importance to a state. However, he does stray from the image a bit and this is where the constructivist line of thinking comes into play.

Huntington stresses the importance of a cultural divide between and among states in the global world. The emphasis on culture, Huntington would say, creates civilizations to include 1 or more states. By that, Huntington defines civilizations as both the broadest characterization of states and “ by common objective elements, such as language, history, religion, customs, institutions, and by the subjective self-identification of people” (24). This defining of civilizations and culture as important is certainly related to the constructivist approach. This is particularly so because one of the assumptions constructivists make is in viewing the international structure in terms of social structure, norms, and identities of agents.

Seeing now that Huntington’s paper has elements of both the realist image and the constructivist interpretive understanding, one could certainly make the case that Huntington’s paper should be considered a constructivist analysis. I, however, don’t necessarily believe that this paper should be considered a constructivist analysis. Rather, I only believe that one could make the argument that this paper is such. I believe this to be the case because as I read through “ A Clash of Civilizations?” I could not say for certain that it was a truly constructivist analysis. Sure, as I have pointed out here, Huntington’s paper definitely has elements of constructivism, but does that automatically lead to this paper actually being a constructivist analysis?

Perhaps the ideas and arguments expressed in Huntington's paper only appeared to mimic the constructivist approach and really, his line of thinking was rooted more appropriately with some other offshoot of the realist image.