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## Eurocentrism in Samuel P. Huntington's Concept of the Clash of Civilisations

**Abstract:** The article is dedicated to an issue of Eurocentrism in American political scientist Samuel P. Huntington's concept of the clash of civilisations. The arguments presented indicate that Huntington's concept is pure Eurocentric. I start by mentioning a few of Huntington's critics (Noam Chomsky, Samir Amin, Arjun Appadurai, and John M. Hobson). The next step includes analysing in detail the "Eurocentrism anatomy" and presenting Eurocentrism as a phenomenon based on two axes, which I call "materialistic" and "epistemological". In other words, Eurocentrism is a kind of spectrum. Thanks to that, I compare Huntington's concept with facts from literature embedded in both axes. Apart from other arguments, Eurocentric factors in the clash of civilisations are 1) civilisations in the past, 2) origin of the West, 3) demographic argument, and 4) the downfall of the West. I argue that the clash of civilisations is based on false, Eurocentric assumptions and prejudices.

**Keywords:** *imperialism, neoconservatism, neoimperialism, Eurocentrism, clash of civilisations, Huntington*

### Introduction

The main goal of the article is to present the arguments and point out the elements of Eurocentrism in the concept of the clash of civilisations formulated by Samuel P. Huntington. On the one hand, the article can be recognised as a theoretical synthesis of what Eurocentrism is. On the other hand, it can be seen as another critique of Huntington's work from a relatively poorly researched perspective. The whole article is focused on the phenomenon of Eurocentrism and its connections with various aspects of Huntington's concept. I intend to highlight the most significant factors that make the clash of civilisations pure Eurocentric. This particular interpretation of Eurocentrism ("Eurocentrism Anatomy") is my own, and it is based on interdisciplinary literature from political science, comparative history and anthropology.

### **(Some) Problems with Huntington**

Huntington has been criticised by many researchers as a political scientist, public figure, and even a politician. His history of disputes and critiques used to be complex and always connected with strong and explicit views. Noam Chomsky recalled one of Huntington's activities in Brazil in the 1970s when he "urged some relaxation of the fascist terror", and he "suggested the model of Turkey or Mexican one-party rule, playing down the importance of liberal rights in comparison with the more significant values of »institutionalisation« and stability" (Chomsky, 1993, pp. 193). During the cold war, Huntington supported the US government as a politician/public figure and political scientist. At the same time, he strongly criticised the modernisation theory, mainly as a "naive" one.

However, when the Cold War ended, Huntington's views evolved due to the changing multipolar world of politics and the internal condition of Western civilisation (mostly the US). Hence his polemic with Francis Fukuyama, Huntington argued that the history of the multipolar world divided into seven or eight civilisations is far from the end. The post-Cold War period and the future (basically next century) is not going to be, according to Huntington, a period of peace, but a period of new conflicts between civilisations, the causes of which were to be primarily culturally (religion, language, work ethos, demographic factors, etc.) conditioned (Huntington, 2007).

Huntington's concept has been criticised hundreds of times, so I would like to mention a few of them (from different perspectives):

Samir Amin, the theorist of imperialism, called Huntington's concept an "idiotic text" because if someone used the "same method [as Huntington], a writer who would have been alive during the religious wars of the sixteenth century would have concluded that Europe was condemned to self-destruction or at least that one of the two camps (Protestant or Catholic) would succeed in dominating the whole continent" (Amin, 2004, p. 80). Moreover, according to Amin, Huntington's concept justifies imperialism, skips the whole issue of capital accumulation, gives agency to ideology and cultural factors. Besides, "in the past he [Huntington] used to produce texts legitimising support for Third World dictatorships in the name of »development«, he produces today a text that legitimises the means deployed to manage the crisis through the polarisation of conflicts around "cultural incompatibilities" (Amin, 1996, p. 10).

Arjun Appadurai, a theorist of globalisation, presents another argument. The Anthropologist calls Huntington's concept the "primordialism with a macrogeographical base". It means double culture reductionism: reducing all social changes to culture but also reducing a particular civilisation to a homogeneous singularity: "The world appears as a large series of slowly moving cultural glaciers, with sharp contrasts at their boundaries and little variety within. (...) This is a costly error especially in the case of Islam because it feeds, perhaps unintentionally, the spatialised fantasies that led George Bush and his advisors to try to localise Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and decimate a cell by erasing a landmass" (Appadurai,

2006, pp. 115–116). Apart from this argument, Appadurai suggests that Huntington's concept is racist and expresses a complete misunderstanding of the global world's specificity (Appadurai, 2006, pp. 3–4, 115–117).

John M. Hobson introduced an important point of view. His argument compares Huntington's concept to authors from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century who directly referred to the theories of racism and anti-immigrant positions. Hobson calls Huntington's concept a "defensive Eurocentrism", and according to him, there is a "close parallel between Huntington and the racist-imperialist thinker, Alfred Mahan". Moreover, an "even closer link exists between Huntington and the racist cultural realism", especially in authors such as Charles H. Pearson, Lothrop Stoddard and Bertram L. Putnam. They all share the belief that there is a threat that the "»barbaric peril« poses for Western civilisation" (Hobson, 2012, p. 279).

In the clash of civilisations, this new "barbaric peril" is, first of all, globalisation which, according to Huntington, means basically "non-Western immigration peril". Huntington sees the immigrants as a "Trojan horse" responsible for the "political virus for home-grown Western multiculturalism" and "political correctness" (Hobson, 2012, pp. 281, 284). The "defensive Eurocentrism" can be seen as a combination of racism and xenophobia with a strong belief in the superiority of Western civilisation, which is currently in danger.

Another Hobson's argument was historical deconstruction. Firstly, Hobson combines the clash of civilisations with Edward Said's studies on postcolonialism. Secondly, Hobson points out the non-Western ("oriental") origins of the Western civilisation (Hobson, 2009). It is also the intention that I am doing below on, using the different literature.

To sum up, these mentioned "strong and explicit views" were recognised many times as fascist and un- or anti-democratic (Chomsky), imperialistic (Amin), incompatible with globalisation (Appadurai), and so on. Some of these features can be seen as Eurocentric; Eurocentrism, after all, is – especially in common sense – a broad concept. Hence it should be clarified. Therefore, the next steps are: 1) clarifying what Eurocentrism is, and 2) indicating the Eurocentric factors of the clash of civilisations from the perspective that is probably closest to John M. Hobson (racism, but also wrong assumptions about history, "human nature" and social reality).

## **Eurocentrism Anatomy**

According to John M. Hobson: "From then [1492], the traditional view has it, the Europeans spread outwards conquering the East and Far West while simultaneously laying down the tracks of capitalism along which the whole world could be delivered from the jaws of deprivation and misery into the bright light of modernity. Accordingly, it seems entirely natural or self-evident to most of us to conflate the progressive story of world history with the Rise and Triumph of the West. This traditional view can be called »Eurocentric«« (Hobson, 2004, p. 2). In fact, the discourse of Eurocentrism takes place on two interrelated

axes, which could be called “materialistic” and “epistemological”. However, they are not two completely separate discourses, and usually, the participants of the debate on Eurocentrism take part in both of them.

The materialistic axis is focused on economic history and political economy. It concerns an issue that dates back to the times of Adam Smith, Karl Marx and Max Weber, namely the dispute about the beginning and genesis of capitalism – *The Great Debate* (Goody, 2006). The dispute is broadly divided into two main aspects: the first one concerns the questions of when and why Europe (the West) “overtook” (or not) the rest of the world in entering the path to global hegemony; the other one is when and why capitalism was invented (or not) in Europe (in the West). With the debate over 200 years old, and since Marx’s time has been additionally complicated by the emergence of new critical perspectives, it cannot be summarised here precisely – such a task would require a separate monograph. Simplifying, in the interpretation of a large number of researchers referring to (neo)classical and Marxist traditions, capitalism could only be “born” (invented) in Europe – researchers as different as David S. Landes and Immanuel Wallerstein agree on this (Goody, 2006 pp. 53, 59, 102–103, 159). According to Landes, Europe “took the lead” already around 1000, while capitalism was invented thanks to “cultural foundations”, and for Wallerstein, the “long 16<sup>th</sup> century”, capital accumulation (material base) and new forms of social work organisation, both researchers make similar diagnoses in the light of Eurocentrism (Landes, 2014; Wallerstein, 2011).

The epistemological axis is focused on economic history and philosophy. Here, too, two main aspects of arranging the debate can be distinguished. The first one is related to the colonial and post-colonial discourse, while the other one is to the uniqueness of European non-material culture, being simultaneously a case analogous to the materialistic axis. However, while in the case of capitalism, one can talk about the “great debate”, the discourses are more dispersed. To simplify it, the post-colonial discourse was created thanks to Western scholars working at universities, coming from countries that were former colonies of the West. In addition to criticising colonialism as such, the commander’s elite and various forms of colonial oppression (symbolic, political, etc.), these researchers noticed and began to criticise language, as well as methods and tools of science itself produced in the West.

A representative example of this type of debate is the American historian Dipesh Chakrabarty’s project “provincialising Europe” (Chakrabarty, 2011). The researcher contests, first of all, considering the world exclusively in European cognitive and analytical categories. He believes that even the category of “political” applied to the research on Indian peasant uprisings was not appropriate because the “political sphere has hardly ever been abstracted from the spheres of religion and kinship”. According to Chakrabarty, one should also go beyond the ontological assumptions resulting from secular concepts of the political and the social (Chakrabarty, 2011, pp. 17, 20). In other words, researching the history of non-Western societies cannot universalise European enlightenment ideas, such as modernity, politics or Max Weber’s “disenchantment of the world”.

The philosopher Slavoj Žižek presents another point of view, according to that a contemporary opposition to Eurocentrism can be thoughtless and constitutes an “epistemological obstacle”. Polemicizing with Indian theorists critical of the use of the English language – treating it as a post-colonial form of domination – Žižek (2021, pp. 278, 288) writes that in this configuration of real oppression, the “dream of a new universalist Indian democracy” is subjected to, and not simply a citizen of India using the language of the former coloniser. In addition, in the philosopher’s opinion, celebrating the “permanence of local traditions and community ethics” is the task of these post-colonial theorists from the upper class and caste and not the real members of the religious groups. In other words, instead of criticising the liberal myth – in his opinion – a fake one – of the universality of rights, these theorists should draw conclusions from this “wound” and start trying to create their own universalism.

The second aspect of the epistemological axis focuses on philosophical and historical discourses on non-material inventions and epistemological colonisation. On the one hand, then, as with the invention of the plow or printing, researchers argue about the invention of democracy, human rights, or individualism. According to Goody, this position is wrong because it largely ignores or overlooks the achievements of cultures outside Europe. However, these discourses are dispersed and concern every non-material element of social reality, from democracy to the disregard for illiterate cultures. On the other hand, Goody also draws attention to another element of this aspect – epistemological colonialism and “history theft” in the form of “naturalised”: unified time (e.g., the arbitrary division into seven-day weeks or years before “our” era), unified space (e.g., Mercator map or the arbitrary selection of the Greenwich meridian) and universal periodisation (e.g., division into epochs, the idea of progress) (Goody, 2009, pp. 23–35).

So, what is Eurocentrism? First, I firmly believe we should rather talk about Eurocentrism or a Eurocentric attitude, falling within a specific interaxle spectrum. Such an attitude is grounded in the natural reflex of ethnocentrism. Therefore, on the organisation of the experience, “assuming that the subject of this experience is in the centre – be it an individual, group or community” (Goody, 2009, p. 15). As a research stance, it is justified, but it must be subject to empirical or other verification in the discourse (e.g., in cases related to epistemological debate). Otherwise, such an attitude may be read as fundamentalist and become the leaven of the Eurocentric model of the axis model resistant to criticism.

## **Eurocentrism and the Clash of Civilisations**

I would like to formulate some arguments by highlighting the most significant Eurocentric factors in the Huntington’s concept:

## 1. Civilisations in the Past

Huntington is an unequivocally anthropological and historiosophical pessimist. He writes about the past: the “essence of humanity is the history of civilisation. It is impossible to think of it in other categories” (Huntington, 2007, p. 46). The wording is Eurocentric, and behind it is the assumption that apart from “civilisation”, there was only “barbarity”. Such an interpretation of the past is untrue, as evidenced by numerous recent anthropological and archaeological studies (Goody, 2012; Scott, 2017). Stateless or non-state peoples were not barbaric or “peoples without history”; in fact, they were just “external in space” to “civilisation” (capitalism, industrialism etc.) but were not prior in time (Wolf, 2009). Moreover, members of these peoples often enjoyed higher levels of quality of life, shorter working hours, more complex non-material cultures and social relationships, and consumed a healthier, richer in protein, and more varied diet than the state peoples – the “civilised” ones (Goody, 2009; Scott, 2017).

Also, according to Huntington (2007, p. 59): “religion is the central element that defines civilisation”. This statement paradox is that there are no people outside the Western “disenchantment” who would not believe it was descended from the gods (Sahlins, 2002). At the same time, many of the people outside this “disenchantment” have elements of scepticism in their culture – including oral cultures (Goody, 2009, p. 257). Huntington (2007, p. 440) adds to emphasise his pessimism: “Wars between clans, tribes, ethnic groups and nations have been fought in all epochs and all civilisations, are rooted (...) in human nature”. It is another assumption made by Huntington that is simply not supported by empirical data. There have always been, both in the past and now, people today who do not practice any kind of war (Graeber, 2017). The last issue is Huntington’s vision of epistemological and ontological differences between the West (western civilisation) and the East (eastern civilisations), also pointed out by John M. Hobson. According to Goody (2012, p. 291), these differences are apparent because “[f]rom the beginning of the Age of Metals what we see is part of (...) long-term development of cultural features, in Eurasia involving a movement of objects, techniques and ideas, first mainly from West to East, then from East to West. The direction of this movement continued in that way until the Renaissance and was later largely reverse, as it may be doing again”. What Goody (2006) means is the “East” and the “West” are not opposed to each other. On the contrary, both constituted themselves through mutual contacts and origins in the Bronze Age.

In other words, Huntington’s vision of the past, on which his concept of the clash of civilisations is built, is at least simplified and based on reductionist, Eurocentric assumptions. Moreover, civilisation in this configuration is based on false assumptions about human nature, society and stateless/non-state peoples.

## 2. The Rise of the West

In Huntington's interpretation, the West began in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, and until about 1500, it was relatively isolated as a civilisation. In turn, from 1500 on, other civilisations found themselves under the influence of "pressure" from the West, eventually becoming subordinate to it somehow. Before that, however, "for over three thousand years that have elapsed since the emergence of the first civilisations, contacts between them either did not exist at all (with some exceptions), or were limited, or sporadic and intense" (Huntington, 2007, pp. 56, 60).

It is not true either. Europe before 1500 was isolated (which is also not entirely true, as evidenced by the presence of Muslims in the Iberian Peninsula and the Balkans or the Silk Road) because it produced relatively few goods that would be of interest to other Eurasian peoples. These peoples had very dynamic trade relations with one other and with Africa, which was closely connected with intensive cultural exchange. Merchants and craftsmen moved freely throughout the East, and cultures were constantly influenced by other cultures. There was nothing odd that a Hindu temple was built in Akkad or that in northern Ghana, entire districts (*zongo*) were created for Muslim merchants (Goody, 2006, pp. 184, 211). In the Chinese city of Hangzhou, in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, there were 10 "international" markets, and Christians, Jews, and Muslims lived there in entire quarters designated for them, with churches, mosques, etc. (Robbins, 2008, p. 89). These are just a few examples, but one could go on endlessly to show how wrong Huntington is and how his worldview is based on Eurocentric prejudices and assumptions.

## 3. Demographic Argument

One of the main alleged threats to the West civilisation is multiculturalism, which Hobson mentioned. In Huntington's interpretation, the West is in danger because of immigrants from other civilisations who reproduce quickly and threaten the position of "Anglo-Saxon" values and culture. Huntington calls this problem a "Hispanic challenge" (Huntington, 2004). This argument means that multiculturalism, like, e.g., "Mexican demographic expansion", could threaten 19<sup>th</sup>-century American territorial captures in the south of the country (Huntington, 2007, p. 349). Problematic is also "Muslim demographic invasion", which threatens the whole West by immigration and terrorism (Huntington, 2007, p. 346).

The first problem with this way of thinking is racism, which John M. Hobson pointed out. However, the second problem is that Huntington (2007, pp. 186, 189) again bases his own concept on wrong assumptions: "Larger populations require more resources, and densely populated and rapidly expanding countries tend to push outward, occupy territory and put pressure on less demographically dynamic nations" and the "driving force behind the Islamic Revival have been (...) spectacular rates of population growth".

Although Huntington is right about demographic rates in Islamic and Latin American countries, he avoids that the demographic issue is connected with the post-colonial situation and regaining the agency of third-world societies. “High fertility rates are not a proof of ignorance, old-fashioned religious values or lack of education, but are the result of economic and social factors, to which local residents, mainly women, react by adjusting the size of their family” (Robbins, 2008, p. 201). In other words, the causes of immigration are the problem, not immigration itself. “Defensive Eurocentrism” in the concept of the clash of civilisations avoids that completely. Huntington suggests that the solution is to build a “citadel of Western civilisation” and implement the racist policy instead of getting rid of poverty in former Western colonies in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

#### 4. Downfall of the West

Huntington is not wrong about the “pressure” that made it possible to conquer almost the whole world by the West. Thanks to “guns, germs, and steel” (Diamond, 1997), the West controlled 84% of all lands in 1920. However, then “global political geography changed (...) – from one world in 1920 to three in the 1960s and over half a dozen in the 1990s” (Huntington, 2007, pp. 64, 70). As the Cold War and decolonisation progressed, the world was changing, so the civilisations themselves changed – in the world of Islam, some countries began to enrich themselves by sales of fossil fuels, and much of Africa and Asia experienced an unprecedented increase in birth rates, the importance of China and India increased, the countries of Southeast Asia began to grow rich quickly and catch up with the West in terms of technological innovation. Latin America has gained more subjectivity than before. In other words, the world of the eight civilisations became “multipolar”, and the West “displayed many of the features typical, according to Quigley, of a mature civilisation entering the decay stage” (Huntington, 2007, p. 535). It also meant the intensification of conflicts and “border wars”, as Huntington (2007, p. 445) described, among others using the phrase the “bloody borders of Islam”.

However, apart from the obvious economic reasons for many of these conflicts (Robbins, 2008, pp. 350–374), it is worth looking at the causes of the “downfall” of the West. Huntington sees them in the “decline of morality”, a factor far more important in his opinion than economic or demographic issues. It consists of 1) the increase in anti-social behaviour, 2) the breakdown of the family, 3) the decline of social capital, 4) the decline of the work ethos and indulgence in one’s own pleasures, 5) waning interest in science and knowledge. An additional challenge in this regard is the already mentioned “culturally alien immigrants” coming to the Western countries (Huntington, 2007, pp. 536–537).

Surprisingly, Huntington seems to overlook the economic and structural factors related to all five points, which appeared as early as the 1950s (Pobłocki, 2017, pp. 53, 88–96, 147–152). His Eurocentrism makes him look for the reasons for the “pressure” of the West since 1500 and its global domination, as well as its decline and downfall, mainly within the



West itself. He does not take seriously the thought that this alleged issue of the “decline of morality” is connected with:

- inequalities created by capitalism,
- welfare state erosion, meaning collapse of the state, the collapse of the universal public services, the collapse of social capital, mutual trust and so on,
- capital accumulation, especially the accumulation by dispossession that means capital accumulation by capital itself: people are not just dispossessed from common goods but also political agency, urban space, their own properties, and so on (Harvey, 2005, pp. 159–165),
- other structural and economic problems analysed by Kacper Pobłocki (2017). Some of them have recently been analysed by Jason Hickel, who called them “growthism”: the belief that regardless of international relations, capital must accumulate, and GDP must grow (Hickel, 2020). In other words, the “development” of non-Western lands (“civilisations”) was necessary for economic growth and capital accumulation.

Should there be a downfall of the West, it has global, structural and economic causes. And if there are civilisations, as in Huntington’s concept, more than cultural factors would determine the ontological status of any of them or its enduring domination.

## **Conclusions**

1. Huntington has been criticised as a public figure/politician and political scientist. After the Cold War, these criticisms mainly focused on racism and xenophobia (in the concept of the clash of civilisations but also other Huntington’s books and articles). Especially racism can be seen as a Eurocentric factor. John M. Hobson’s “defensive Eurocentrism” may be interpreted this way, but this also applies to the remarks of Arjun Appadurai or Samir Amin. Apart from “defensive Eurocentrism”, Hobson pointed out other Eurocentric factors in the clash of civilisations – factors related to the misinterpretation of the history of “civilisations”.
2. Therefore, Eurocentrism is a broader phenomenon than racism, xenophobia, etc. It can be present in a biaxial model, including the “materialistic” and “epistemological” axes. In this configuration, Hobson’s and Appadurai’s (and others’) arguments are just factors or elements of a much larger matrix or constellation of Eurocentrism.
3. Eurocentrism in Huntington’s concept is much more complicated because of being a broad spectrum of phenomena. It concerns both the present and the broadly understood past. It covers (apart from other arguments): 1) civilisations in the past, 2) the rise of the West, 3) demographic argument, and 4) the downfall of the West. From this point of view, the clash of civilisations is a pure Eurocentric concept.

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