

Edward Said: The Myth of the Clash of Civilizations

This is the first part of [Edward Said](#)'s lecture on Samuel Huntington's essay and book on the "Clash of Civilizations," at the University of Massachusetts in 1996.

Edward Said was a Palestinian-American academic, writer and advocate for Palestinian rights, while Samuel Huntington's 'Clash of Civilizations' theory which suggest people's cultural and religious identities will be the primary source of conflict in future.

The transcript is from [the Media Education Forum website](#).

Edward Said:

Thank you very much. I'm going to start, in fact, talk throughout about an essay and a book written by Samuel Huntington entitled The Clash of Civilizations. When it first appeared in 1993 in the journal Foreign Affairs, it had a question mark after it and it announced in it's first sentence that world politics is entering a new phase. Three years later Huntington expanded the essay, some would say bloated it, to the size of a book without a question mark. The new book which was published last year, entitled The Clash of Civilizations and the Emerging World Order. My premise is that the essay is better than the book. I mean it got worse the more he added to it. So I'll concentrate most of my attention on the essay but make some comments about the book as we go along.

Now, what Huntington meant when he said that world politics was entering a new phase was that whereas in the recent past world conflicts had been between ideological camps, grouping the first, second and third worlds into warring entities, the new style of politics which he discerned would entail

conflicts between different and presumably clashing civilizations. I quote him, "The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics." Later he explains how it is that the principal clash will be between Western and non Western civilization, but he spends most of his time in the two works, discussing the disagreements, potential or actual, between what he calls the West on the one hand, and on the other, Islamic and Confucian civilizations. In terms of detail, a great deal more attention, hostile attention, is paid to Islam than to any other civilization including the West. In much of the tremendous interest subsequently taken in Huntington's essay, I think derives from its timing rather than exclusively from what it says.

As he himself notes, there have been several intellectual and political attempts since the end of the Cold War to map the emerging world situation, and this includes Francis Fukuyama's thesis on the end of history, which nobody talks about, so the end of Fukuyama really. (laughter) And the thesis put about during the latter days of the Bush Administration, the theory of the so-called New World Order. But, there have been more serious attempts to deal with the coming millennium in works by Paul Kennedy for example, Eric Hobsbawm, less interesting and more rabid Conor Cruise O'Brien, Robert Kaplan and a book that's apparently making the rounds in campuses on Jihad vs. McWorld by Benjamin Barber. All these books have looked at the coming millennium with considerable attention to the causes of future conflict, which has given them all, I think justly, cause for alarm.

The core of Huntington's vision, which is not really original with him, is the idea of an unceasing clash, a concept of conflict, which slides somewhat effortlessly into the political space vacated by the unremitting war of ideas and values embodied in the unregretted Cold War of which of

course, Huntington, was a great theorist. I don't think therefore it's inaccurate to suggest that what Huntington's providing in his work, especially since it's primarily addressed to influential opinion and policy makers, is in fact a recycled version of the Cold War thesis that conflicts in today's and tomorrow's world will remain not economic or social in essence but ideological. And if that is so, one ideology, the West, is the still point or the locus, around which for Huntington all other civilizations turn. In effect then, the Cold War continues, but this time on many fronts, with many more serious and basic systems of values and ideas like Islam and Confucianism struggling for ascendancy and even dominance over the West. Not surprisingly, therefore, Huntington concludes his essay with a brief survey, not only his essay but his book as well, with a survey of what it is that the West must do to remain strong and keep it's opponents weak and divided.

He says, "The West must exploit differences and conflicts among Confucian and Islamic states to support in other civilizations groups sympathetic to Western values and interests. To strengthen international institutions that reflect and legitimate western interests and values, and to promote the involvement of nonwestern states in those institutions." And that's a very interventionist and quite aggressive attitude towards other civilizations to get them to be more western. So strong and insistent is Huntington's notion that other civilizations necessarily clash with the West and so relentlessly aggressive and chauvinistic is his prescription for what the West must do to continue winning, so that the reader is forced to conclude that he's really most interested in continuing and expanding the Cold War by other means, rather than advancing ideas that might help us to understand the current world scene or ideas that would try to reconcile between cultures.

Not only will conflict continue, but he says, the conflict

between civilizations will be the latest phase in the evolution of conflict in the modern world. It's as a very brief and rather crudely articulated manual in the art of maintaining a wartime status in the minds of Americans and others, that Huntington's work has to be now understood. I go so far as saying that it argues from the standpoint of Pentagon planners and Defense industry executives, who may have temporarily lost their occupations after the end of the Cold War but have now discovered a new vocation for themselves. But perhaps because Huntington is more interested in policy prescriptions than he is either in history or careful analysis of cultures, Huntington in my opinion is quite misleading in what he says and how he puts things. A great deal of his argument, first of all, depends on second and third hand opinion that scants the enormous advances in our concrete understanding and theoretical understanding of how cultures work. How they change, and how they can best be grasped or apprehended.

A brief look at the people and opinions he quotes suggests that journalism and popular demagoguery are his main sources rather than serious scholarship or theory. When you draw on tendentious publicists and scholars, you already prejudice the argument in favor of conflict and polemic rather than in favor of true understanding and the kind of cooperation between peoples that our planet needs.

Huntington's authorities are not the cultures themselves but a small handful authorities picked by him, because, in fact, they emphasize the latent bellicosity in one or another statement by one or another so-called spokesperson for or about that culture. The giveaway for me is the title of his book and his essay, *The Clash of Civilizations*. Which is not his phrase but Bernard Lewis's. On the last page of Lewis's essay titled, *The Roots of Muslim Rage*, which appeared in the September 1990 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*, Lewis speaks about the current problem with the Islamic world, I quote:

(this is incredible stuff.) "It should by now be clear," Lewis says, "that we are facing a mood and movement in Islam far transcending the level of issues and policies and the governments that pursue them. This is no less than a clash of civilizations. The perhaps irrational, but surely historic receptions of an ancient rival against our" (whenever you hear the word our, you want to head for the exit) "Judeo Christian heritage, our secular present and the world-wide expansion of both. It is crucially important that we on our side should not be provoked into an equally historic but also equally irrational reaction against that rival." In other words we shouldn't be as crazy as they are. And, of course Lewis is very much listened too at the Council of Foreign Relations, the New Yorker Review of Books and so and so forth. But few people today with any sense would want to volunteer such sweeping characterizations as the one's advanced by Lewis about a billion Muslims scattered through five continents, dozens of differing languages and traditions and histories. Of them all, Lewis says that they all are enraged at western modernity. As if a billion people were really only one person and western civilization was no more complicated a matter than a simple declarative sentence.

But what I do want to stress is first of all how Huntington has picked up from Lewis, in the classic kind of Orientalist gesture, the notion that civilizations are monolithic and homogeneous and second how, again from Lewis, he assumes the unchanging character of the duality between us and them. In other words, I think it's absolutely imperative to stress that like Lewis, Huntington doesn't write neutral, descriptive and objective prose, but is himself a polemicist whose rhetoric not only depends heavily on prior arguments about a war (inaudible) but in effect perpetuates them. Far from being an arbiter between civilizations, which is what he suggests he might be doing, Huntington is a partisan, advocate of one civilization over all the others. Like Lewis, Huntington defines Islamic civilization reductively, as if what most

matters about it is it supposed anti-Westernism. I mean it doesn't matter to him that Muslims have other things to do than to think about the West with hatred. But you get the impression that that's all they are thinking about is how to destroy the West, bomb it and destroy the whole world really

For his part, Lewis tries to give a set of reasons for his definition that Islam has never modernized, that it never separated between Church and State, that it's incapable of understanding other civilization, all of them complete untruths. I mean, of course the Arabs, Muslims have traveled well before the Europeans in the East, in Africa, and in Europe and were great discoverers of other civilizations well before Marco Polo and Columbus. But Huntington doesn't bother with any of this. For him Islam, Confucianism, and the other five or si

civilizations, Hindu, Japanese, Slavic, Orthodox, Latin American and African that still exist, are separate from each other and consequently potentially in a conflict, which he wants to manage, not resolve. He writes therefore as a crisis manager, not as a student of culture and civilizations, nor as a reconciler between them. At the core, and this is what has made his work strike so responsive a chord among post-Cold War policy makers, is this sense that you saw in crisis managing prose during the Vietnam War, this sense of cutting through a lot of unnecessary details. You go through masses of scholarship and huge amounts of experience and you boil all of it down to a couple of catchy easy to quote and remember ideas, which are then passed off as pragmatic, hard-headed, practical, sensible, clear.

Now I come to the more serious part of what I have to say, is this the best way to understand the world we live in? Is it wise to produce a simplified map of the world and then hand it go generals and civilian lawmakers as a prescription for first comprehending and then acting in the world? Doesn't this in effect prolong and deepen conflict? What does it do to

minimize civilizational conflict? Do we want the clash of civilizations? Doesn't it mobilize nationalist passions and therefore nationalist murderousness? Shouldn't we be asking the question, why is one doing this sort of thing? To understand or to act? To mitigate or to aggravate the likelihood of conflict?

XI'd want to begin to survey the world situation by commenting on how prevalent it has become for people to speak now in the name of large, and in my opinion, undesirably vague and manipulable abstractions like 'the West' or 'Japanese culture' or 'Slavic culture' or 'Islam' or 'Confucianism'. Labels that collapse particular religions, races and ethnicities into ideologies that are considerably more unpleasant and provocative than Gabino and Renan did 150 years ago.

Let me give a couple of examples to illustrate what I mean. The language of group identity makes a particularly strident appearance from the middle to the end of the nineteenth century as the culmination of decades of international competition between the great European and American powers for territories in Africa and Asia. In the battle for the empty spaces of Africa, the so called Dark Continent, France and Britain, Germany, Belgium, Portugal resort not only to force but to a whole slew of theories and rhetorics for justifying their plunder. Perhaps the most famous of such devices is a French notion of the civilizing mission – la mission civilisatrice – a notion underlying which is the idea that some races and cultures have a higher aim in life than others. This gives the more powerful, the more developed, the more civilized, the higher, the right to colonize others, not in the name of brute force, or plunder, both of which are standard components of the exercise, but in the name of a noble ideal.

Conrad's most famous story, *The Heart of Darkness*, is an ironic, even terrifying enactment of this thesis that as the narrator puts it, "the conquest of the Earth which mostly

means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion, a slightly flatter noses than ourselves is not a pretty thing, when you look into it too much. What redeems it, is the idea. An idea at the back of it, not a sentimental pretense but an idea, and an unselfish belief in the idea, something you can bow down before and sacrifice to.”

In response to this sort of logic two things occur. One is that competing imperial powers invent their own theory of cultural destiny in order to justify their actions abroad. Britain had such a theory, Germany had one, Belgium had one and of course in the concept of Manifest Destiny, the United States had one too. These redeeming ideas dignify the practice of competition and clash, whose real purpose as Conrad quite accurately saw, was self aggrandizement, power, conquest, treasure, and unrestrained self-pride. I'd go so far as to say that what we today call the politics or the rhetoric of identity, by which a member of one ethnic or religious or national or cultural group, puts that group at the center of the world, derives from that period of imperial competition at the end of the last century, and this in turn, provokes the concept of worlds at war that quite obviously is at the heart of Huntington's article. In the related of political economy, geography, anthropology, and historiography, the theory that each world is self enclosed, has it's own boundaries and special territory is applied to the world map, to the structure of civilizations, to the notion that each race has a special destiny, a psychology and an ethos. Renan said for example, that the Chinese race, its destiny is to serve, they are a docile people and they must serve. The Black race must be the bearers, the laborers of mankind cause they are strong in physique and can work hard, that kind of – all these ideas almost without exception are based not on the harmony but on the clash or conflict between worlds.

The second thing that happens is that the lesser people, the objects of the imperial gaze so to speak; respond by resisting

their forcible manipulation and settlement. We now know that active resistance to the white man began the moment he set foot in places like Algeria, East Africa, India and elsewhere. Later, primary resistance was succeeded by secondary resistance. The organization of political cultural movements determined to achieve independence and liberation from imperial control. At precisely the moment in the nineteenth century that among the European and American powers a rhetoric of cultural self-justification begins to be widespread, a responding rhetoric among the colonized people develops, one that speaks in terms of African or Asian or Arab or Muslim unity, independence, self-determination

In India for example, the Congress party was organized in 1880 and by the turn of the century, had convinced the Indian elite that only by supporting Indian languages, industry and commerce could political freedom come. These are ours and ours alone, runs the argument, and only by supporting our world against theirs, note the "us versus them", construction, can we finally stand on our own. One finds a similar logic at work during the Meiji period in modern Japan. Something like this rhetoric of belonging is also lodged at the heart of each independence movement, nationalism. And it achieved the result shortly after the World War II, not only of dismantling over a period of about twenty years the classical empires but of winning independence for dozens of countries thereafter. India, Indonesia, most of the Arab countries, Indochina, Algeria, Kenya, etc. all these emerged onto the world scene sometimes peacefully, sometimes as the effect of internal development as in the Japanese instance, or of ugly colonial wars and wars of national liberation.

In both a Colonial and post-Colonial contacts therefore, rhetorics of general, cultural or civilizational specificity went in two potential directions, one, a utopian line that insisted on an overall pattern of integration and harmony between all peoples, the other a line that suggested as to how

all cultures were so specific and jealous as to reject and war against all the others. Among instance of the utopian, are the language and institutions of the United Nations founded in the aftermath of World War II, and the subsequent development out of that of various attempts of world government predicated on coexistence, voluntary limitations of sovereignty, the integration of peoples and cultures harmoniously. Among the second are the theory and practice of the Cold War and more recently the idea of a clash of civilizations, which appears to be a necessity for a world of so many parts and indeed even a certainty. According to this, cultures and civilizations are basically separated from each other, that is to say the core of Islam is to be separated from everything else. The core of the West is to be separated from all the others.

I don't want to be invidious here. In the Islamic world there has been a resurgence of rhetoric and movements stressing the innate opposition between Islam and the West, just as in Africa, Europe, Asia and elsewhere movements have appeared that stress the need for excluding or exterminating, as in Bosnia, others as undesirable. White Apartheid in South Africa was such a movement as is the Zionist idea that Palestine should be for the Jews only and the Palestinians as non-Jews should have a lesser place. Afro-centricity, Islam-centricity are movements that also stress the independence and separateness of cultures.

Within each civilizational camp we will notice that there are official representatives of that culture who make themselves into its mouthpiece. Who assign themselves the role of articulating 'our' or for that matter 'their' essence. This always requires compression, reduction, exaggeration. So in the first and most immediate level then, statements about what 'our' culture is, civilization is, or ought to be, necessarily involves a contest over the definition. That's why I think it's more accurate to say that the period that we're living in is not the clash of civilizations but the clash of

definitions. Anyone who has the slightest understanding of how cultures really work, knows that defining the culture, saying what is for members of that culture, is always a major and even in undemocratic societies, an ongoing contest. There are conical authorities to be selected, regularly revised, debated, selected, dismissed. There are ideas of good and evil, belonging or not belonging, hierarchies of values to be specified, discussed, and re-discussed. Each culture moreover defines its enemies, what stands beyond it and threatens it, an other to be despised and fought against.

But, cultures are not the same. There is an official culture, a culture of priests, academics, and the state. It provides definitions of patriotism, loyalty, boundaries and what I've called belonging. It is this official culture that speaks in the name of the whole. But it's also true, and this is completely missing from the Clash of Civilization argument as we hear it in Huntington, in addition to the mainstream or official culture, there are dissenting or alternative, unorthodox, heterodox, strands that contain many antiauthoritarian themes in them that are in competition with the official culture. These can be called the counter-culture, an ensemble of practices associated with various kinds of outsiders, the poor, immigrants, artistic Bohemians, workers, rebels, artists. From the counter-culture comes the critique of authority and attacks on what is official and orthodox. No culture is understandable without some sense of this ever-present source of creative provocation from the unofficial to the official. To disregard the sense of restlessness in the West, in Islam, in Confucianism within each culture and to assume that there's complete homogeneity between culture and identity, is to miss what is vital and fertile in culture.

A couple of years ago Arthur Schlesinger wrote a book called the Disuniting of America, which is a kind of *cris de coeur* about the way in which American history, which for him is the history of Bancroft and Adams and so on, is dissolving into

something quite different. And he says that new groups in American society want the writing of history to reflect not only an America that was conceived of and ruled by Patricians and landowners, but an America in which slaves, servants, laborers and poor immigrants played an important, but as yet unacknowledged role. The narratives of such people, silenced by the great discourses whose source was Washington, the investment banks of New York, the universities of New England, and the great industrial fortunes of the middle and far west, have come to disrupt the slow progress and unruffled serenity of the official story. They ask questions, interject the experience of social unfortunates, and make the claims of lesser peoples, of women, Asian and African Americans, and various other minorities, sexual as well as ethnic.

There's a similar debate inside the Islamic world today which in the often hysterical outcry about the threat of Islam, Islamic Fundamentalism and terrorism that one encounters so often in the media, is often lost sight of completely. Like any other major world culture Islam contains within itself an astonishing variety of currents and countercurrents. I would say that it is this extremely widespread attitude of questioning and skepticism towards age-old authority that characterizes the post war world in both east and west. And it's that that Huntington cannot handle and therefore resorts to the business of this clash of cultures or class of civilizations.

To theorists of that sort, civilization identity is a stable and undisturbed thing, like a room full of furniture at the back of your house. This is extremely far from the truth, not just in the Islamic world but throughout the entire surface of the globe. To emphasize the differences between cultures is completely to ignore the literally unending debate about defining the culture or civilization within those civilizations including western ones. These debates completely undermine any idea of a fixed identity and hence the

relationships between identities. What Huntington considers to be a sort of ontological fact of political existence, to wit, the clash of civilizations. Too much attention paid to managing and clarifying the clash of cultures obliterates something else, the fact of a great and often silent exchange and dialogue between them. What culture today, whether Japanese, Arab, European, Korean, Chinese, Indian, has not had long intimate and extraordinarily rich contacts with other cultures? There is no exception to this exchange at all. Much the same is true of literature where readers for example of Garcia Marquez, Naguib Mahfuz, Kenzaburo Oe exist far beyond the national or cultural boundaries imposed by language and nation. In my own field of comparative literature, there's a commitment to the relationships between literatures as to their reconciliation and harmony despite the existence of powerful ideological and national barriers between them. And this sort of cooperative collective enterprise is what one misses in the proclamations of an undying clash between cultures. The lifelong dedication that has existed in all modern and ancient societies among scholars, artists, musicians, visionaries and prophets, to try to come to terms with the other, with that other society or culture that seems so foreign and so distant.

It seems to me that unless we emphasize and maximize a spirit of cooperation and humanistic exchange, and here I don't speak simply of uninformed delight or amateurish enthusiasm for the exotic but rather a profound existential commitment and labor on behalf of the other. Unless we do that, we are going to end up superficially and stridently banging the drum for our culture in opposition to all the others.

And we know also in another very important study of the way cultures work, the book, co-authored or co-edited by Terrence Ranger and Eric Hobsbawm, that even tradition can be invented. I mean the idea of a culture and a civilization being something that's stable and fixed is completely disproved by

this notion of how traditions can be invented, manufactured for the occasion so the traditions are really not the wonderfully stable things that we are but rather abstractions that can quite easily be created, destroyed, manipulated and so on.

As I've argued in several of my own works, in today's Europe and the United States what is described as Islam, for instance, because this is where the burden, I think of Clash of Civilizations thesis goes, what is described as Islam belongs to the discourse of Orientalism, a construction fabricated to whip up feelings of hostility and antipathy against a part of the world that happens to be of strategic importance for it's oil, it's threatening adjacency to Christianity, it's formidable history of competition with the West. Yet this is a very different thing, that what to Muslims who live within it's domain, Islam really is. There's a world of difference between Islam in Indonesia and Islam in Egypt. By the same token, the volatility of today's struggle over the meaning and definition of Islam is evident, in Egypt, where the secular powers of society are in conflict with various Islamic protest movements and reformers over the nature of Islam and in such circumstances the easiest and least accurate thing is to say, "That is the world of Islam, and see how it is all terrorists and fundamentalists and see also how different, how irrational they are, compared to us."

But the truly weakest part, and I conclude here, the weakest part of the clash of cultures and civilizations thesis is the rigid separation assumed between them despite the overwhelming evidence that today's world is, in fact, a world of mixtures, of migrations and of crossings over, of boundaries traversed. One of the major crises affecting countries like France, Britain and the U.S. has been brought about by the realization, now dawning everywhere, that no culture or society is purely one thing. Sizeable minorities, North Africans in France, the African Caribbean, and Indian

populations in Britain, Asian and African elements in this country, dispute the idea that civilization, that prided themselves on being homogeneous can continue to do so. There are no insulated cultures or civilizations. Any attempt made to separate them into the watertight compartments alleged by Huntington and his ilk does damage to their variety, their diversity, their sheer complexity of elements, their radical hybridity. The more insistent we are on the separation of the cultures, the more inaccurate we are about ourselves and about others. The notion of an exclusionary civilization is to my way of thinking an impossible one. The real question then is whether in the end we want to work for civilizations that are separate or whether we should be taking the more integrative but perhaps more difficult path which is to try to see them as making one vast hole, whose exact contours are impossible for any person to grasp, but whose certain existence we can intuit and feel and study.

XIn view of the depressing actualities around us, the presence of intercultural, interethnic conflicts, it does seem to me ostrich-like to suggest that we in Europe and the U.S. should maintain our civilization, which Huntington calls the West, by holding everyone and all the others at bay, increasing the rifts between peoples in order to prolong our dominance. That is in effect what he argues and one can quite easily understand why it is that his essay was published in Foreign Affairs and why so many policy makers have drifted toward it as allowing the U.S. to extend the mindset of the Cold War into a different time and for a new audience. Much more productive and useful is a new global mentality or consciousness that sees the dangers we face from the standpoint of the whole human race. These dangers include the pauperization of most of the globe's population, the emergence of virulent local, national, ethnic and religious sentiment as in Bosnia, Rwanda, Lebanon, Chechnya and elsewhere, the decline of literacy and onset of a new illiteracy based on electronic modes of communication, television and the new

information global superhighway, the fragmentation and threatened disappearance of the grand narratives of emancipation and enlightenment. Our most precious asset in the face of such a dire transformation of history is the emergence not of a sense of clash but a sense of community, understanding, sympathy, and hope, which is the direct opposite of what Huntington provokes.

If I may quote some lines by the great Martiniquean poet, Aime Cesaire that I used in my book *On Culture and Imperialism*, and I never tire of quoting these lines, and he speaks here for man, *l'homme* in French, but "the work of man is only just beginning and it remains to conquer all the violence entrenched in the recesses of our passion and no race possess the monopoly of beauty, of intelligence, of force, and there's a place for all at the rendezvous of victory" and what they imply, these sentiments prepare the way for dissolution of cultural barriers as a kind of blockage between cultures as well as of the pride that prevents the kind of benign globalism already to be found for instance in the environmental movement, in scientific cooperation, in the women's movement, and the universal concern for human rights, in concepts of global thought that stress community and sharing over racial, gender or class dominance. It would seem to me therefore, that efforts to return the community of civilizations to a primitive stage of narcissistic struggle, needs to be understood, not as descriptions about how in fact civilizations behave, but rather as incitements to wasteful conflict and un-edifying chauvinism and that seems to be exactly what we don't need.