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***When Cultural Prejudices Parade as Social Science: The Problem of Selection Bias***

For anyone concerned with achieving methodological rigor in the social sciences, Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* suffers from so many problems that it is difficult to know where to begin. His concept of civilizations is too ill-defined and ambiguous to be meaningful and, even if one accepts his civilizational categories at face value, the empirical evidence simply does not support the idea that there is a “new” world order defined primarily by conflicts between such groups. For starters, how can Huntington's framework even begin to explain the hundreds of conflicts that take place within the black-boxes of “African”, “Islamic”, “Latin American”, and “Orthodox” civilization. And this is only the tip of the iceberg. Oddly, the theoretical and empirical short-comings of this book only mask the real danger of its contents: an un-justifiable focus on “conflict” in its depiction of relations between “the West” and Islam. When you combine Huntington's Western-centric approach with his muddled and contradictory logic, what you get is not a general map of the world order but a myopic message about Islam that risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophesy. The underlying error, which also persists in one of Fox's articles, is selection bias. If the goal is to make a general statement about the relationship between “the West” and Islam, limiting your study to conflicts is a surefire way to achieve skewed results. By overemphasising conflict, such academic work only succeeds in perpetuating negative cultural stereotypes.

Disregarding the fact that Huntington mercilessly vacillates between treating “the West” and the Orthodox world as two separate civilizations and the the same-thing in order to support his argument, the pejorative tone that Huntington uses to describe Islam borders on offensive. For Huntington, Islam is inherently militant and Muslims are “obsessed with the inferiority of their power”(217). Islam is also depicted as rigid, backwards and incapable of change whereas the ideology of the “West” is assumed to be progressive and malleable. One representative quote succinctly demonstrate this prejudice: “So long as Islam remains Islam (which it will) and the West remains the West (which is more dubious) this

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fundamental conflict....will continue to define their relations”(212). Islam is thus an inherently stagnant and dogmatic civilization whereas the West can miraculously reinvent itself at will. But as the Eickelman chapter points out, “in open-political settings, Islamists are usually forced into grater moderation”(40). Ironically, it is often Western intervention that prevents these open-political settings from developing in the first place, guaranteeing that radicals will remain radical. Huntington may cite Edward Said and criticize analysts who assume the inherent superiority of the “familiar” over the “strange”(33) but this alone does not absolve him of perpetrating the exact same crime.

The inconsistency of Huntington's historical arguments and his jumbled logic also betray his partiality. Huntington does briefly remark that only four Muslim countries—Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Afghanistan have remained independent from Western colonial rule. Yet what he fails to mention is that the West has maintained relatively favorable relationships with governments in two of these countries, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, and that these just happen to be the same two countries in which the West still has not intervened. Somehow, despite the fact that “the United States engaged in seventeen military operation in the Middle East, all of them directed against Muslims” between 1980-95, we are supposed to believe that “the problem for the Islam is not the CIA or the U.S. Department of Defense”(217). How is it possible that the Ottoman expansion and the resultant “proximity” to non-Muslims somehow underpins the clash of civilizations but direct Western military and political intervention in the Middle East does not? We are also supposed to believe that civilizational conflict revolves around “inter-civilizational issues such as weapons proliferation, human rights and democracy, control of oil, migration, Islamist terrorism and Western intervention.” How are weapons proliferation and the control of oil civilizational issues? Furthermore, Huntington wants us to believe that the animosity between Islam and the West has persisted “across the centuries” but also somehow represents a remaking of the new world order. (207-8). This is all nonsensical.

Fox's attempts to test Huntington's theory are admirable but, in one key sense “Two Civilizations and Ethnic Conflict: Islam and the West” simply falls into the trap that Huntington's book

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lays. To test Huntington's arguments Fox uses the Minorities at Risk Data set. Just like Huntington's theory, this dataset is flawed in its very construction as it only includes “groups at risk”—or scenarios in which conflict already exists. It is impossible to say anything meaningful about the propensity for conflict, or the change in the propensity for conflict, when only conflictual cases are examined. Fox's idea of analysing things from three perspectives is indeed a step in the correct direction. Nonetheless, because of selection bias we have no way of telling whether the number of conflicts with Islam (even when analyzed from only the Western perspective) increased for truly civilizational reason or simply because increased contact between Muslims and the West brought with it a proportional change in the number of conflicts.

Fox's other article avoids the selection bias problem by employing conflict years as the variable of interest. More insightful than his quantitative rebuttal of Huntington's findings however is his insight that “if policy makers come to the conclusion that Islam is the next great threat to the West, then that is what these policy makers are likely to see.”(210). Letting the disorderly bunch of prejudices that is *Clash of Civilizations* parade itself as social science runs the risk of provoking policy makers and the general public into turning Huntington's misguided thinking into a self-fulfilling prophesy.