Hungtington Reconsidered. The Dynamics of Religious and Political Conflicts

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Summary

In his famous Foreign Affairs article (3/1993) and his world-wide best-selling book *The Clash of Civilizations* (1996) Samuel Huntington presented a prognosis about the reshaping of world politics in the 21st century. In the future – so his argument – the macro level of world politics will be characterized by religiously defined fault lines, particularly between the Western civilization and that part of the world where Islam is the predominant civilization.

Now, Huntington was not the first author in history to tackle religiously motivated fault lines structuring some kind of clash of civilizations. Let me just refer to one prominent story, not a prognosis at that time, but a sort of politically motivated account which we find in some versions of the Old Testament:

The two Books of the Maccabees contained in the Old Testament tell the story of the Maccabees's struggle against the compulsory Hellenization of Judea (2nd century a.D.). Antiochus, Seleucid ruler, intended to turn the Jerusalem temple into a shrine of the Olympian Zeus and thus prohibiting Jewish law. By desecrating their temple and introducing a new law Jewish religion was to be suppressed radically. The narrators tell about fighting, but also about collaboration and, above all, about the Judean resistance movement which was religiously inspired; and, last not least, the story is about the successful rebellion of the Maccabees led by Judas Maccabeus. Judas Maccabeus versus Antiochus: this is – *pars pro toto* – symbolic of a politicised *cultural struggle* – although in a quite narrow corner of the world and long ago.

By the way, in his *Occasional Oratorio* (1746), more known in its later enlarged version under the title *Judas Maccabaeus* (1746/47) George Frideric Handel used the story of the Old Testament with the purpose of psychologically arming the Protestant people in England against a religious counter-reformation and political restauration, both threatening by the so called Second Jacobite uprising in 1745/46, led by Prince Charles Edward of the Stuarts, invading England from Scotland – once again a story about a clash of civilizations at the micro level: Protestantism in its British version vs. Catholicism.

Will 21st-century's world politics slide into cultural conflicts *("Kulturkämpfe")* of the caliber of the Old Testament? Those who claim this – as Samuel Huntington and some who follow him – do not deny that in the future there will still be power struggles and distributive conflicts on the stage of world politics. But real conflict dynamics will – according to the thesis of authors like Huntington – arise out of incompatible, culturally formed "deep cosmologies": from basically different ideas about man, nature and transcendence and especially from contradictory conceptions of the "good society" and a "just international order" emerging from such deep cosmologies.

In these predictions "civilizations", i.e. the cultural regions that are characterized by Confucianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, particularly by Islam as well as Western and other cultures, are declared to be the very basis of political actions; and the core states of such cultural areas are considered to be the main actors of world politics: Accordingly, the "fault lines" between cultures become the true political trouble spots both on the level of world politics and on its various micro-levels.

I

In the past 15 years this forecast has triggered an intensive dispute all over the world. In view of lacking empirical evidence in support of this thesis, this is amazing since *in world politics* the external behavior of the main actors continues to follow a logic that discernibly derives more from the system of international relations than from inner cultural impulses: Where power accumulates on the international stage, there anti-power is forming up; especially hegemonial endeavors are almost instinctively thwarted by counteracting strategies. If national aims can no longer be realized unilaterally, states try to achieve them by means of multilateral concertation or cooperation. In doing so cultural closeness or distance are not of any importance. Where dense economic interconnections become the determining factor for their behavior, these are – irrespective of culture – based on emerging comparably high socio-economic levels of development: The "logic of the power state" may then be replaced by that of the "trading state", but not by the "logic of culture".

However, this logic of culture is particularly often referred to when pointing out that according to the Islamic self-image the world is divided in two: the world of Islam/peace and that of the foreign countries/war. By reason of its universalistic claim, Islam would be driven – so it is assumed – to missionize the exterior world of the infidels. In compliance with this assertion, the behavior of Islamic states towards the community of the faithful, the *umma*, should significantly differ from that towards unbelievers. However, the politics of the Islamic states from Morocco to Indonesia actually follows identical premises in both directions: opportunistic power calculations, economic interests; and only now and then the interest in exporting revolution motivated by domestic political considerations is of relevance.

What is noticeable in the Islamic area becomes apparent in Asia as well. Neither in East Asia nor in Southeast Asia there is any prospect of a common political "Asian platform". Just the opposite: As a result of further modernization thrusts, East and Southeast Asia which are economically fairly successful gradually grow into the OECD-club, so far dominated by the West – at least in so far as their foreign economic relations are concerned. And here they are more or less welcome despite all problematic repercussions in Western countries. Besides, in the big world conferences of the last decade of the 20th century it was quite conspicuous that – with the exception of the Vienna Conference on Human Rights – the fault lines were determined by conflicts very different from cultural ones: the gap between North and South; between nuclear states, nuclear threshold countries and non-nuclear countries; states with an extremely high increase in population and those whose increase in population tends to be zero or negative; between the highly industrialized states causing a wealth-induced environmental destruction of world climate and the ozon layer and the less developed countries where poverty-induced environmental destruction proceeds.

Thus, world politics is still much more characterized by conflict lines which are *not* based on culture than by really existing or only imagined "deep cosmologies".

II

If cultural regions ("civilizations") cannot be observed as actors on the macro level of world politics, do not cultural fault lines nonetheless determine the conflicts on lower levels? Is the thesis of the "clash of civilizations" of more substance with regard to processes inside states – *at the micro level?*

At first sight this supposition seems to make sense. In Northern Ireland Protestants and Catholics were fiercely opposed to each other until recently, despite many endeavors for peace; in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict Jews and Muslims bitterly confront each other. In the south of Sudan members of tribal religions and Christians try to keep off the danger of Islamization threatening from the north. In Lebanon heavily armed militias that represent, though not exclusively, religious groups had been fighting each other in a civil war for more than 10 years; and presently we observe the potential reescalation of this conflict. Since the mid-eighties of the last century until recently Buddhist Singhaleses and Hindu Tamils had been at feud with each other in Sri Lanka. In India the escalation of "communal conflicts" between Hindu fundamentalists and Muslims as well as a small minority of christians, respectively, could have been observed for many years. Sunni and Shi'i Muslims engage each other in Pakistan and, in particular, in Iraq. In Algeria, Egypt, Turkey and Afghanistan it is the

militant Islamists' aim to abolish the secular state. After all: The wars and conflicts in former Yugoslavia are very often interpreted as typical examples of cultural conflicts.

Contrary to this first-sight-evidence, cultural conflicts based on rivaling *religious* or *cultural* concepts ("cosmologies") about the shaping of public order are rather the exception than the rule. At present such a conflict can be observed within Israel: Should Israel continue to remain a state in accordance with secular premises for which liberal Zionists stand, or should, as the ultraorthodox and national-religious groups demand, a public order comprehensively embodying "Jewish law" *(halacha)* be created? The *cultural* substance of the conflict within Israel plays quite an important role, far more than in conflicts which today are being discussed as culturally determined ethnic or ethnopolitical conflicts, mostly empirically referred to in the thesis of the "clash of civilizations".

Generally, specific religious and cultural factors are only rarely of significance *when conflicts start to escalate*. Ethnic conflicts basically originate from socio-economic problems and mainly break out after a long experience of blatant social and economic discrimination. It is especially minorities that suffer from such discrimination, for which reason most ethnic conflicts are minority conflicts. More seldom a majority population – like the Kosova-Albanians in Kosova of the past – had to defend themselves against the apartheid policy of a dominant minority (in Kosova once against the Serbs), just as the Serb minority within Kosova has to defend itself now against the Kosova-Albanians after Kosova's independence (2008): a rare type of case (an ethnic minority ruling apartheid-like over a majority turning into an expectable regular case (majority vs. minority).

Under contemporary conditions it is almost impossible to refuse minorities some social upward mobility. Usually, minorities also have access to education and, even more important, to mass media. So the better living prospects of the majority population cannot be concealed from them. And if the gap between the expectation of social progress on the one hand and its blockades built into the very structure of society on the other hand is experienced as more and more frustrating, and if, furthermore, the life chances thus thwarted are felt as *collective* destiny, then culturalization of politics or politicization of culture is likely. Such development is inevitable if discrimination includes the cultural/ religious dimension from the very outset.

The culturalization of conflict within the constellation of thwarted life prospects and of *collective* frustration is not a new reality. So, for instance, in the 19th century, Czech nationalism within the Austrian-Hungarian Empire won its support of the masses when in Bohemia and Moravia more and more Czechs had to realize that notwithstanding their good training decisive positions in administration, universities, lawyers' offices and similar institutions were not open to them. For the same reason, more than 150 years later the new young intelligentsia in occupied East Timor developed their own cultural, i.e. national conciousness although Jakarta, by purposeful training programs, wanted to produce loyal Indonesians and not Timorese nationalists – *peine perdue*, as usual in such cases.

In Germany many people were confronted with similar experience till far into the first half of the 20th century: In predominantly Protestant areas it was extraordinarily difficult for Catholics to climb up the social ladder just as for Protestants in Catholic areas. Politicization of cultural differences happens when minorities are denied realizing their economic and social aims. When such conflicts escalate this leads to a defence reaction respectively, in consequence of which a conflict originally and quite naturally focussed on educational opportunities, upward social mobility, qualified jobs, as well as status, income and political participation, but not on the kind and intensity or even the content of religious faith becomes a *cultural* struggle. Religion and culture then emerge as point of reference; distributive and participation conflicts turn into identity conflicts. As a consequence, cultural struggle permeates social fights.

Thus, caution is advised when interpreting conflicts between Prostestants, Catholics, Muslims, Hindus, Orthodoxes as culturally induced, i.e. as caused by the very content or substance of the respective culture or religion ("cosmologies").

So let us conclude: The *micro level* of politics is also not suitable to support the thesis of the "clash of civilizations". Nevertheless, as the public debate shows, cultural differences and religious incompatibilities are very often considered to be the main cause of these conflicts.

III

Now, there has been a debate on cultural conflicts *in international diplomacy* for quite a while. How is this debate to be interpreted? In international conferences "Asian" and "Islamic" values are opposed to "Western values" and conversely. Western values are described as individualist, Asian and Islamic ones as collectivist. The universal human rights propagated in the post World War II Human Rights Declarations and Covenants are criticized to be Western-eurocentric and are, thus, considered to be the paragon of an individualist culture for which reason some governments in Asia and the Middle East deny their universal validity.

Here it is worthwhile reminding of several precursors of this debate. Before 1933 in Germany "Western *civilizational* values" that were regarded as "superficial" had been contrasted with substantially different, profound *cultural* "German values", and this assessment was not only articulated by peripheral intellectual figures. Some figures were quite prominent like Thomas Mann (even a recipient of the Nobel Price). There was a similar discussion about "Slavic values" in Czarist Russia whose spokesmen could count on Germany's intellectual support. After the breakdown of the Soviet Union the old cultural debate in Russia has been reviving – the only difference being that the former coalition partner in spirit, Germany, has meanwhile joined the "Western *civilization*". During the era of the Soviet Union in the ideological debates of really existing socialism "socialist values" were set against "Western-bourgeois" ones. However, socialist values were not understood as expressing old culture but as a break with tradition: as a programmatic starting point of a completely new social project and a new type of man – "socialist man". Compared with this understanding the advocates of Asian and Islamic values emphasize the rootedness of such values in centuries-old cultural traditions.

But neither at the official nor at the unofficial level do Asians all along the line stand up for "Asian" values. Not even in East and Southeast Asia where this debate started from do they agree. In Japan, Korea and Taiwan they, by and large, did not take any particular interest in this discussion. The pioneers of the debate were Singapore and Malaysia. Later, the Chinese government followed the positions propagated by these two countries. But different voices could even be heard from Malaysia. While the former Prime Minister Mahathir was a decided spokesman of collective Asian values, his former deputy Anwar Ibrahim, not less forcefully, pleaded for a modern cosmopolitan Islam. In Singapore for many years opposition against the authoritarian values defined by the leading autocrats had been articulated as well. Asian non-governmental organizations in their countries and at the Vienna Human Rights Conference in 1993 and at later international meetings vehemently protested against the local rulers' attempts to declare Asian culture to be incompatible with human rights and democracy. Even many years ago the former president of South Korea, Kim Dae-jung, in an argument with Lee Kuan Yew from Singapore who was one of the most distinguished advocates of Asian values drew attention to the fact that human dignity and political legitimacy are well articulated values in old Chinese social philosophy: Kim reminded of Menzius' thesis on the need of legitimation for all political rule. After many years of propagating "Asian values" even Lee Kuan Yew himself interpreted Asian values as a necessary, though only temporary, orientation for Asia's transition to modern, cosmopolitan societies which will have to live up to worldwide competition.

As far as "Islamic values" are concerned, it is striking that they are maintained in the Arab-Iranian region especially. Here, prominent fundmentalist authors are at home, who plead for the resuscitation of the *sharia* (see Sayyid Qutb!). In contrast, a political debate on a reform-oriented Islam is led in Southeast Asia mainly. This different emphasis in the discourses on Islam reflects the chronic crisis of development in North Africa and the Middle East on the one hand and the relatively, though by no means secured, successful development in Southeast Asia on the other hand. But even in the Arab world and particularly in Iran a lively intellectual debate has been quite impressive (Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri etc.).

IV

When interpreting non-European processes, the European development should not be disregarded: Western values and, in particular, human rights have been expounded as a genuine product of European culture. This is right: They, indeed, are a product of the European development. But what does "European culture" or "European development" mean? When letting European culture start with Greek Antiquity, then it is 2500 years old. However, the idea of human rights and the struggle for their acknowledgement were a relevant political factor only during the last 250 years. What we presently

associate with human rights was *not at all* contained in some original "cultural genes" of Europe. The predominant part of European history, as well as cultural history, does not show any sympathy towards those preferences for which human rights today stand. Therefore it is far-fetched to suppose that for reason of an inner "entelechic" logic European history had to end straightforwardly in a victory of the idea of human rights.

Even the history of human rights itself reveals that this is not the case. So the human rights declarations of the late 18th century speak of the people and mankind, but in fact only part of mankind was meant. Those who did not have any education and did not possess any property were not included; women, children, coloreds and slaves, Muslims and people of non-Christian faith were excluded. What started in an excluding way was not extended later because there is an inherent logic leading from exclusion to inclusion (although such logic may exist in the abstract), but because the excluded were more and more no longer willing to bear this situation und began to demand equal rights – until the idea finally prevailed that referring to human rights means *all* people *notwithstanding their concrete circumstances*.

Thus, the *abstract individual* – the individual regardless of sex, age, color, education and socio-economic status – did not exist in the traditional European society which was stratified according to estates as well as other feudal and patriarchal arrangements. The idea of such an individual only emerged when social inequality *as a result of social mobility* (being itself the result of the emerging dynamics of capitalism) became unbearable: in view of flagrant gaps between privileged and discriminated strata, between wealth and poverty, and also in view of new bourgeois layers that experienced the conventional social framework, i.e. the *ancien régime*, to be incompatible with their own social, economic, cultural and political aspirations. The proletarian, feminist and minority social movements have invigorated later on the process of inclusion. From this constellation the politically explosive force *against Europe's own old tradition* arose that finally brought the idea of human rights to fruition. Only then man so far defined collectivistically by social status was liberated to man per se and woman per se. Only then people were conceived as basically equal and endowed with inalienable rights and dignity. Only then the protection of basic individual rights and basic principles of liberal democracy and the rule of law (like the separation of power, universal suffrage, the accountability of public administration, etc.) emerged.

This was a fundamental turning point in European history. It is much more far-reaching than assumed in the international debate on values, in which the idea of human rights is falsely interpreted as an expression of an eternal European culture or as the final result of a kind of cultural-genetic predisposition. In reality human rights and the policy of human rights have always been the outcome of public protests of the masses during phases of social upheavals, of a *"colère publique"* initiated by political dissidents, social-revolutionary and reformist movements questioning the status quo.

V

Regarding European development in this way is of importance in order to understand the cultural debates going on outside of Europe. There, to a certain extent, the conflicts known from recent European history repeat themselves. All non-European societies today are experiencing fundamental changes *that end in an internal pluralization of values*. This transformation results in a shattering of traditions while new orientations become overdue: Some want to imitate Europe, others revive their own tradition. And others believe that it is possible to combine old values with modern technology.

Not surprisingly, the European lines of argumentation of the late 18th and during the 19th and 20th centuries show up again in the rest of the world: Status quo-powers understand, today like in the european past, universalistic individual human rights as a threat to conventional values, their own tradition and standards of decency, whereas the advocates of human rights are no longer willing to bow to autocratic or despotic regimes, to economic exploitation as well as to social and cultural discrimination. For the latter, human rights, now once again "discovered", once again become a political weapon.

Once again, the "colère publique" puts the idea of human rights on the political agenda. And once more the result is *not* predetermined since also outside of Europe there will be a real cultural rift, far more than in the past: *In view of radical economic, social and political changes, the long-standing traditional cultures get – as it happened in Europe once –into conflict with themselves*. Thereby their

collectivist-corporatist and, moreover, often patriarchal and paternalist orientation becomes undermined. A "clash *within* civilizations" develops – a conflict constellation that touches the self-image and the order of whole societies and cultural areas.

Into these long-term confrontations about the social and political order outside of Europe, Europe could bring in its own historic experience. If a realistic, i.e. a true picture of Europe's real history would be passed on, a certain sensitivity could be fostered for the imperative and legitimacy of cultural pluralization and the concomitant conflicts; a sense of tolerance and corresponding institutional arrangements could be conveyed as well. This would counter the trend towards the essentialization or ontologization of cultures that both falsify history, which often make the intercultural dialogue and also the discussion on human rights so unfruitful. Unfortunately, the thesis of the "clash *of* civilizations" has again revived this unrealistic and politically barren misinterpretation.

VI

Future cultural clashes will not be fought between "civilizations". However, this will be no impediment for further arguments about the "clash of civilizations" at the diplomatic level. In distributive conflicts directed against discrimination at the national and/or international level, a politicization of cultural differences will be noticeable whenever fairly satisfactory, pragmatic solutions remain blocked. But, repeating the European experience, the real cultural clashes will be fought "*within* civilizations" or cultures for a long time: at least until in extra-European cultural regions the pluralization of society and culture will be considered as irreversible and a congenial way of conflict management, e.g. the democratic-constitutional state or some viable culture-flavored alternative coping with pluralization will adequately be implemented.

More than ten years ago, in 1998, Europe remembered the Edict of Nantes (1598) – a decree in which after some decades of violent religious conflicts and civil war the French king ordained tolerance from the top not without having in mind his own power political interests – an edict which was annuled by Louis XIV in 1685 reinitiating religious and ethnic persecution. It took centuries before tolerance ultimately became an accepted virtue, *a civic virtue*, for the political class and for most people in Europe, successively. The necessary *collective learning processes* in that respect were protracted, difficult and quite painful. Therefore, one is well advised to recall Europe's real history in all its variety if one wants to understand the conflicts resulting from modernization processes which inevitably are going to happen in non-Western societies in the forthcoming decades. In this quite heterogeneous part of the world there will be periods of progressive and of regressive experiences as well: There is no preordained finality of such collective learning processes characterized by lots of vicissitudes.