

Contemporary Dangers of Huntington's travesty of "History": A Postcolonial Deconstructionist Response and Proposed Solution

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Abstract:

Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* is a seminal text in postcolonial theory and contemporary wartime cultural studies. The *Washington Post* has recently described him as "a prophet for the Trump era". This paper is a response to the dangers of two practices in politics and the academy worldwide: (1) adopting such a view by high rank policy makers; and (2) the Library of Congress' classification of Huntington's book as textbook of "history" that is being taught to students of history, postcolonialism, and cultural studies around the world. Drawing from some postcolonial and literary theorists, including Dipesh Chakrabarty and Gayatri Spivak, the paper deconstructs Huntington's notion of "history" which has been found to be based on secondary sources, selective, ignorant, and marginalizing non-Western histories, including five hundred years of philosophical and scientific contribution of Islamic civilization to the sleeping Europe and the West. The paper calls for the combat of such a dangerous theory and its abolition from the syllabus of the departments of English and history as well as from the usage by high rank political decision makers. After establishing the similarities between Huntington and the nihilist philosopher, Frederick Nietzsche, the researcher concludes with a possible solution to

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the problem of adopting Huntington's view of the inevitable future clash between civilizations: the belief of the contemporary philosopher of phenomenology and hermeneutics, Paul Ricouer that the reality of the existence of the Self cannot be attained without embracing the Other into the Self, becoming one with it, which ultimately eliminates any conflict or violence between individuals, communities and civilizations. This principle is one of the principles of Islam which calls a Muslim Self to be one with the other.

مخاطر تحريف صموئيل هانتينغتون للتاريخ:

قراءة وحلول من وجهة نظر ما بعد الكولونيالية والتفكيكية

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الملخص:

يعتبر كتاب «صراع الحضارات وإعادة صياغة النظام العالمي» لصموئيل هانتينغتون أحد النصوص الرئيسية المعتمدة في دراسات نظرية ما بعد الكولونيالية والدراسات الثقافية المعاصرة في زمن الحرب. وقد وصفت صحيفة واشنطن بوست مؤخرًا مؤلف الكتاب بأنه شخص تحقق تنبؤاته في عهد الرئيس الأمريكي ترامب؛ لذلك يعتبر هذا البحث تحذيرًا من مخاطر الممارسات التي تحصل في المجال السياسي والأكاديمي في جميع أنحاء العالم، كاعتماد الكتاب من قبل صناعات السياسة والقرار العالمي مرجعًا «تاريخيًا» للتعامل مع الشعوب الأخرى، وكذا تصنيف مكتبة الكونغرس لهذا الكتاب على أنه مرجع مهم في "التاريخ"، وللأسف نجد أن الكتاب يُدرّس في قسبي: التاريخ واللغة الإنجليزية (دراسات ما بعد الكولونيالية والدراسات الثقافية) في جميع أنحاء العالم، بالرغم من أخطار نظرية صراع الحضارات، وتحريف الكتاب للتاريخ، وهذا ما يوضحه هذا البحث استنادًا إلى بعض نظريات ما بعد الكولونيالية مثل كتابات (ديبيش شاكاربارتي وغيياتري سبيفاك) والنظرية الأدبية الحديثة وخاصة التفكيكية منها، إذ نجد أن "التاريخ" الذي يعتمد عليه هانتينغتون في نظريته يستند إلى مصادر ثانوية انتقائية غير دقيقة ومهمشة لخمسة قرون من تاريخ الحضارة الإسلامية، ودورها في نهضة الحضارة الغربية. ولهذا يدعو الباحث إلى ضرورة التوعية بخطور هذا التاريخ المحرف، سواء على مستوى صناعات القرار العالمي أم على المستوى الأكاديمي من قسبي: التاريخ واللغة الإنجليزية اللذين يقومان بتدريسه ضمن مقررات ما بعد الكولونيالية والنظرية الأدبية والدراسات الثقافية في جميع أنحاء العالم. وفي نهاية البحث يلقي الباحث الضوء على التشابه بين هانتينغتون وفيلسوف العدمية الألماني فريدريك نيتشه،

كما يوضح الباحث أن أحد الحلول الممكنة للتخفيف من مخاطر هذه النظرية يكمن في نظرية الفيلسوف الفرنسي وعالم الإنسانيات والهرمنوطيقا (علم التأويل) المعاصر بول ريكور، الذي يؤمن بأن فهم الذات لا يمكن أن يتحقق إلا بفهم الآخر، ومحبته كمحبة الشخص لذاته؛ مما ينبي أي صراع بين الأفراد أو الجماعات أو الحضارات، وهذا ما دعا إليه الدين الإسلامي حيث دعا إلى أن يحب المرء لأخيه ما يحبه لنفسه.

1. Introduction

1.1. Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*?

The following paragraph from Huntington's article, "Clash of Civilizations?" sums up his own argument about the shape of the conflict in the future:

It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful factor in the world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future (par. 2)

1.2. Deconstruction

The following definitions of "deconstruction" will inform my approach to Huntington's concept of history. First, in *Key Contemporary Concepts*, John Lechte states that the term "deconstruction" is derived from the German word, *Destruktion*, meaning breaking down or analyzing (par. 1). Secondly, in the *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*, Nicholas Birns defines "deconstruction" as "a method of reading texts to reveal conflicts, silences, and fissures" (par. 1). According to *Key Ideas in Linguistics*

and the *Philosophy of Language*, "texts deconstruct themselves when subjected to relentless close reading" which betrays "the belief that there are stable meanings out there and that it is the business of the reader to tease it out of specific texts" (Rajagopalan, par. 7 & 8). *The Sage Dictionary of Cultural Studies* associates deconstruction with the "undoing" of the binaries of Western philosophy" for the purpose of displaying "the assumptions of a text" that serve to guarantee the power of *truth-claims* by excluding and devaluing the "inferior" part of the binary (par. 1).

2. Deconstructing Huntington's notion of "history"

2.1. Ignorance

2.1.1. Ignorance of Non-Western Histories

For the purposes of proving his thesis, he selects out of the various ethno-national conflicts that seem to pit one "civilization" against the other. In this process of selection, he marginalizes others or, in the term Said borrows from Adorno, consigns to mere "background". He is mainly interested in European history and views other histories from the vantage point of Western history. This leads me to viewing Huntington as an example of Dipesh Chakrabarty's European historian who is characterized by deliberate "exclusion" and "ignorance" of the other. His history is "a given, privileged narrative" which excludes "other narratives of human connections" Huntington's history, William Spanos argues, is a narrative of "blind vision". It has "a definite theoretical [visual] structure", in which the other is excluded from the field of visibility. It is an instance of an Althusserian problematic which "continues to see only that which it itself," and "everything outside its anthropological structure remains invisible." It is a history in

which Europe is the "silent referent" in the histories as a producer of modernity. Huntington reads other non-European histories in terms of a "lack", or "absence". He, thus, subalternizes non-Western histories, to use Gayatri Spivak's notion of subalternity. Indeed, Huntington's history is distinguished by its "repression and violence" towards the other. This "Other" here could mean the other nations or the other historians that Huntington ignores. It could also mean the very function of the academic scholarship which the Harvard Professor's history fails to represent as it should be. The nation state, in Huntington's mind, belongs only to the Western civilization; other nations are qualified to acquire only "subject-hood" (or slavery) but not "citizenship" as Chakrabarty points out. The big problem is that "we" find Huntington's theories useful in explaining our history. This is the paradox that Chakrabarty talks about, such as the view adopted by some Arab and Muslim intellectuals that a reliable source on the history of Islam is *The Cambridge History of Islam* (edited by Holt and others). The point is that postcolonial societies should tend to consider their own sources about their cultures as more reliable than non-local ones. In fact, one of the problems in many Arab countries is seeing anything that is foreign as better than the local. This is, however; different from what happens in many countries the West where an inferior gaze towards the foreign (or the Other) takes place. Edward Said's theory of Orientalism is informative here. Arabs, Muslims and non-Western peoples and cultures have constantly been seen to be not only inferior to their Western counterparts but also sources of continuous threat to them. But there is a recent attempt to return the European gaze, like Meera Kosambi's *Returning the American Gaze: Pandita Ramabai's The Peoples of the United States* (2003), which is a critique of American life, in an attempt to reverse the established

equation of the male Orientalist travel narrative. Usually, it is the Western Orientalist traveler who writes the history of non-western peoples (T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* is an example). Here, we have the opposite, i.e. we have a woman from the Orient (India) who travelled from India to the United States and has written a kind of travelogue that criticizes the American way of life. Leila Abulela's novel, *The Translator* is perhaps relevant here: A woman from the Orient (the Sudan) named Sammar saves the life of Rae, the Orientalist whom Sammar works for as a translator and falls in love with. They both get married after Rae's conversion into Islam. Another attempt in Arabic postcolonial fiction to return the gaze is Tayeb Saleh's *Season of Migration to the North* in which the Arab postcolonial subject, Mustafa, returns the gaze of the colonizer by raping and killing Western women. In addition, contrary to the expectations of the Western Saidian gaze, Saleh makes Mustafa a person who is superior to the British people by becoming an Oxford professor and author of Economics. Will Arab and Muslim authors (literary men and women, film makers, historians, etc) return the gaze to Huntington's travesty of history? Perhaps, a better alternative in my view is not to return the gaze on the colonial Western other, but to turn the gaze on the Arab-Muslim self in an attempt to go beyond the endless non-futile cycle of 'writing' and 'writing back' and think of the problems that the Arab-Muslim Self suffers from and how to find possible solutions for them. An instance is Brenda Cossman's article, "Turning the Gaze Back on Itself: Comparative Law, Feminist Legal Studies, and the Postcolonial Project" which argues that "in looking at others we are always also looking at ourselves" (543). This unity between the Self and the Other has relevance to the solution I propose at the end of this paper.

2.1.2. Ignorance of Non-Western Civilizations

Another instance of the "ignorance" of Huntingtonian history is that Huntington himself acknowledges that the world recognizes 21 civilizations, whereas he recognizes "only" seven civilizations and a "possibly" (possibly!) African one; the seven are: the Sinic (Chinese, which includes China, Taiwan, Korea, and Vietnam), Japanese, Hindu, Islamic, Orthodox (Russia, Serbia, and Greece), Western, and Latin American. Huntington is a historian who is ignorant of the Egyptian civilization of the Pharaoh which lasted for more than three thousand years in the Nile River valley. He is ignorant of the Pyramids (one of the Seven Wonders of the World). He is also ignorant of the other great African civilizations, like: ancient Nubia, Ghana, Mali, Songhai, Kush, Axum, The Almoravids, Songhay, The Hausa Kingdoms, Kanem-Bornu, The Forest Kingdoms, The Swahili Kingdoms, and The Great Zimbabwe Empire.

2.1.3. Ignorance of Muslims' Contribution to Science

Huntington also ignores the five hundred years of philosophical and scientific interaction between Islamic and Western Civilizations. The Arabs' philosophical and scientific tradition was the basis of European modern civilization. In Raphael's huge painting *The School of Athens* in the Vatican, Averroes (1126 – 1198) (in Arabic, Ibn Rushd) is shown standing behind Pythagoras. He was an Andalusian-Arab master of philosophy, Islamic law, astronomy, geography, mathematics, medicine, physics, and science. He is most famous for his translations and commentaries of Aristotle's works. It was through the Latin translations of Averroes's work beginning in the 12th century that the legacy of Aristotle became more widely known in the medieval West.

Reflecting the respect which medieval European scholars paid to him, Averroes is mentioned by Dante in *The Divine Comedy* with the great pagan philosopher whose spirits dwell in "the place that favor fame" in Limbo. He appears in a short story by Jorge Luis Borges, entitled "Averroes's Search" in which he is portrayed trying to find the meanings of the words tragedy and comedy. The short story is included in his second anthology of short stories, *El Aleph*. He is briefly mentioned in the novel *Ulysses* by James Joyce alongside Maimonides. Huntington is a bad student of history, art, and literature.

Another influential Muslim scholar is Avicenna (in Arabic, Ibn Sina). The translation of Avicenna's *The Canon of Medicine* (Al-Qanoon) into Latin caused the rebirth of European medicine in the twelfth century, stimulating Latin medical writing. Muslim scholars have greatly influenced the West in different fields like, Mathematics, Astronomy, Chemistry, Physics, Medicine, Pharmacy and Pharmacology, Philosophy and Metaphysics, Geography, Sociology, Literature, Art, Music, and Architecture. The German Orientalist, Sigrid Hunke (1913–1999), who is known for her claims of Muslim superiority over Western values asserts this fact in her book *Allahs Sonne uber dem Abendland* (*The Sun of Allah Shines over the West*). Thus, Huntington's history is ignorant of a long and significant period of time in the history of humanity – a period acknowledged by many Western objective historians. A history that based on ignorance is indeed unreliable.

2.2. Poor Secondary Sources

Not only is Huntington's history characterized by "ignorance" but also by poor secondary sources upon which he depends in his arguments. For, comparative historians should rely on the work of other historians, which is not Huntington's habit. For instance, in order to support his general claim of the clash of civilizations, he argues that "the fault lines between civilizations are replacing the political and ideological boundaries of the Cold War as the flash points for crisis and bloodshed." And the historical source of Huntington's "dividing line" between Christianity and Islam is William Wallace: "The most significant dividing line in Europe, as William Wallace has suggested, may well be the eastern boundary of Western Christianity in the year 1500" (Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?") The original title of Huntington's article had a question mark which was removed when he wrote his book, *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Huntington cites the warrior Wallace who lived in the 13th century Scotland as a resource for a historical event that belongs to a later period: the dividing line between Christianity and Islam after the end of the Cold War! Another Huntingtonian resource I object to is Archie Roosevelt. Huntington cites him in talking about the wars between Muslims and Russians. Roosevelt, the fourth child of US President, Theodore Roosevelt, was an army officer soldier and commander of U.S. forces in both World Wars I and II. He did not even go to Russia to experience the problems between Muslims and Russians. For example, he cites him to support his generalization that "religion [he was talking about Islam] reinforces the revival of ethnicities and re-stimulates Russian fears about the security of their southern

borders" (39). "This concern is wellcaptured," Huntington argues, "by Archie Roosevelt" who makes statements about Russian history and the wars between Muslims and Russians (although, to repeat, he has never been there):

Much of Russian history concerns the struggle between the Slavs and the Turkic peoples on theirborders, which dates back to the foundation of the Russian state more than a thousand years ago. In theSlavs' millennium-long confrontation with their eastern neighbors lies the key to an understanding not onlyof Russian history, but Russian character. To understand Russian realities today, one has to have aconcept of the great Turkic ethnic group that has preoccupied Russians through the centuries. (qtd. in Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, 39)

Thus, he is not a reliable historical source. Huntington gives another example of the "bloody" fault lines between Muslims and non-Muslims, notably the clash between Muslims and Hindus in India. Here, he commits the error of identifying "civilization" with "religion" which is a narrow interpretation of the concept of civilization.

2.3. Grand generalizations & Inaccurate History

Robert Marks argues that "Huntington pulls together historical anecdotes from numerous times and places as evidence for his claims", which lead him to the use of grand generalized statements like "throughout history", "history tells us", and the like (101). Marks also believes that Huntington's history is bad in terms of morality; it is "politics masquerading as scholarship" (104). Huntington concludes that "Islam has bloody borders" not because of Muslims" acts but because "Islam is the problem". He

fails to understand that Islam and Muslims are two different entities. One should not judge a religion by the deeds of its followers but by its instructions. This very phrase "Islam has bloody borders" is also a historical error committed by Huntington. It has provoked the noted Pakistani poet Feza Aazmi to write a book of poetry entitled *From the Graveyard of Civilizations: A Muslim Rejoinder to Huntington's Clash of Civilizations* giving an equally angry rejoinder "Christianity's Bloody Borders" to Huntington. Here are a few lines Aazmi writes about the argument that all war perpetrators in world history were Christians, not Muslims.

Your pseudo-intellectuals in their scathing diatribe
Persist that embroiled is Islam's civilization in many a conflict,
That Islam's borders are smeared with blood and gore.
Alas!
Some home truths they choose to ignore.
A living reality disregarded that world's facts historical testimony bear.
All were ferocious
All battles heinous were handiwork infamous of civilizations Western.
A believer in Islam were not Hitler nor Stalin nor Mussolini.
Neither Churchill, nor Tojo, nor Truman followers were of Muslim ideology.
Adorned they like stars bright the iridescent firmament of Christian identity.
Belonged they all to Western fraternity.
Their bloodied raiment soiled with many wars gory.
Saturated are pages of history with accounts blood-curdling

Of wars tyrannical perpetrated on humanity by none other than followers of Christianity!

Evade you must not the solemn truth

Of devastation caused by atom bomb you dropped

On hopeless women

On innocent children (Aazmi 41, emphasis mine).

Another thing Huntington does not understand the diversity of the Islamic World. He paints with a very broad brush, distinguishing neither Protestant and Catholic in the West nor Sunni and Shi'ite in Islam. Christopher Vasilopoulos argues that "Islam" in the singular is a construction; it is more accurate to speak of "Islamic worlds":

One can distinguish a theocracy and state of virtue in Iran and the Sudan, a politically opportunistic interpretation of Islam in Iraq, open repression in Syria, enlightened absolutism in Jordan, a secular, typical post-colonial state in Egypt meanwhile under threat from within, and a singularly interesting version in Libya - an Islamic regime that the orthodox would characterize as heretical. If one adds the particular forms of Islam that have developed in the Maghreb, parts of sub-Saharan Africa and particularly in Asia, then the heterogeneity of political Islam becomes patently clear. (89)

Further, one of the arguments Huntington makes to support his theory of the clash of civilizations is what he calls the "kin-country syndrome". He argues that Iraq and Iran, who were enemies, became friends in 1990 in order to face their common religious enemy, the West. But why does the West collide with Arabs against Iraq in 2001? Surely,

it is the West's economic and military interests that matters, not culture or religion. This shows the inaccuracy of Huntington's reading of history here.

2.4. A Travesty of Human Nature

Huntington's theory is a pessimistic generalization, as it attempts to convey that there is a "natural" inclination of human beings towards conflict and violence. It is a dark vision of the essence of man. Man is not a "beast" by nature. It is the social circumstances that corrupt him (Adolf Eichmann, for Hannah Arendt is a case in point). Huntington's argument of the clash of civilizations excludes or negates the tendency of man to try to "know" the other, to build and desire a life of peace. To me, Huntington's history is nothing but a Nietzsche "poison" that "encumbers one's steps as a dark invisible burden" (61). I compare Huntington to Nietzsche here because, like Huntington's, Nietzsche's theory is like a poison as he believes that we can interpret the world "from the point of view that human beings, and indeed all life, are engaged in a struggle to increase their power" (Cohen. par.1). My point here is that Huntington's theory as well as that of Nietzsche work like a 'poison' – a handicap in one's way towards tolerance and acceptance of the other. Existential phenomenologists like Jean-Paul Sartre and Paul Ricoeur address the importance of acknowledging the Other as part of the Self, leading to tolerance and affinity – which results in non-violence and utter peace in the world (other existentialist works that deal with violence are: James Dodd's *Violence and Phenomenology* (2009), Hannah Arendt's *On Violence* (1973), and Ronald E. Santoni's *Sartre on Violence: Curiously Ambivalent* (2004). Thus, instead of adopting the enlightenment motto: "I think, therefore I am", a better alternative for me

(which Nietzsche and Huntington should have used) is the existential phenomenologists' motto: "You are, therefore, I am" (meaning, I exist because of you).

Sartre's explanation is quotable:

Contrary to the philosophy of Descartes, contrary to that of Kant, when we say 'I think' we are attaining to ourselves in the presence of the other, and we are just as certain of the other as we are of ourselves ... I cannot obtain any truth whatsoever about myself, except through the mediation of another. The other is indispensable to my existence, and equally so to any knowledge I can have of myself. (45)

Ricouer goes to the extreme and believes that if we want to understand the hermeneutics of a foreign text (even a human being, I think – an Other, so to say), we should embrace it to become ourselves:

The exegete can appropriate its meaning to himself: foreign, he makes it familiar, that is, he makes it his own. It is thus the growth of his own understanding of himself that he pursues through his understanding of others. Every hermeneutics is thus, explicitly or implicitly, self-understanding by means of understanding others. (106)

This philosophy is the solution to the problem of hatred and violence that the theories of Nietzsche and Huntington generate. Ricouer calls for the embrace of the other, to make it yourself, and thus, there will be no violence or clash between individuals and civilizations at all. It is noteworthy here to mention that this solution is one of the principles in Islamic tradition which calls the Muslim Self to be one with the

Other, leading thereby to non-violence between individuals (on a micro level) and communities (on a macro level) all over the world.

3. Conclusion

Thus, Huntington's history is flawed and dangerous. Based principally on secondary sources, it is a history that is selective, ignorant, too generalizing, inaccurate and marginalizing of non-Western histories, including five hundred years of philosophical and scientific contribution of Islamic civilization to the sleeping Europe and the West. Therefore, this paper calls for correcting the mistake of using Huntington's book as a valid "history" textbook that is consulted by practitioners in the academy (in English and history departments worldwide) and politics (like states presidents and other political key decision makers). After establishing the similarities between Huntington and the nihilist philosopher, Frederick Nietzsche, I have concluded with a possible solution to the problem of adopting Huntington's view of the inevitable future clash between civilizations: the belief of the contemporary philosopher of phenomenology and hermeneutics, Paul Ricouer that the reality of the existence of the Self cannot be attained without embracing the Other as the Self. This is, in fact, nothing but the Islamic principle of being one with the Other, spreading thereby peace between individuals and civilizations throughout the globe.

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