

The Economic Roots of the ‘Clash of Civilizations’

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Abstract

The clash of civilizations purports to derive from religious, cultural, and ideological differences in given civilizations according to Huntington et al. This paper argues that this term camouflages real gaps in subsistence vs. affluence, non-accessibility vs. accessibility of natural resources, forced illiteracy vs. elite education. Cultural philosophy and neo-classical economics has often served as a cover for a kind of reversed neo-colonialism in which slavery is perpetuated not along ethnic, but definitely along economic lines. Drawing on the research of Maslow, M. Gaffney A. Sen, de Soto, Waring, and the theories of Henry George among others this paper reviews & criticizes a pervasive kind of cultural philosophy and comparative economics that would like to perpetuate rather than close the gap between the affluent and the non-affluent countries. An alternative view of the economic interpretation of history is then offered which keeps in mind optimal wealth creation, an honoring rather than depletion of ecological processes, and the possibility of social justice for the largest number.

Before we can investigate any issue or dilemma successfully we first have to account for the methods we use to arrive at desired results. Or to put it more simply: faced with a plethora of empirical data what touchstone or criterion of truth are we going to use to distinguish the true from the false, the real from the apparent, the cogently necessary to our inquiry from the peripherally superfluous? It has become one of the aporias of philosophy, it has even been called the “scandal of philosophy” that no unified, clear, coherent set of criteria and methodologies has been put forth in its recorded history of thought. The investigative sciences – and we may count economics and the social sciences among them - have at least avoided this scandal with respect to methodologies and they have firmly and solidly based themselves on empiricism and inductivism. This is not the place to summarize or rehearse these methodologies; you are all well familiar with them. The “scandal of philosophy”, however, has not been entirely avoided and spilled over messily so to speak into economics as no universally accepted criterion of

truth has become ascertainable since the five or so centuries modern economics has been laboring to arrive at results, tell us how various economies tick and – theoretically at least – how to make all of us richer. Now it is a time-honored Socratic device that when at a loss to arrive at a sought after result and understand something complex and important that apparently and with some obstination defies understanding, you try to define its more familiar opposite first. Now, the reason that we can come together here at all and engage in this important inquiry presupposes that we all have been moderately well fed, sheltered, and clothed prior to coming here for a reasonable period of time. Robinson Crusoe, for instance, would have been unlikely to join us, for the simple reason that he would have been too busy with the most basic motions of survival. Now if we can't engage in an inquiry for the criterion and the methodology of truth, then we can safely hold that a severe lack of food, shelter, and clothing over extended periods of time may be the opposite of a truth criterion or a truth methodology. And we could not engage in any other elaborate activity either, for that matter. So within an extremely brief period of reasoning we have arrived at Maslow's *hierarchy of needs*, Amartya Sen's decades long empirical research into the nature and origin of poverty and Henry George's theories regarding the same. World poverty is not something to be perpetuated, it is something to be abolished. If we want to apply the great tenants of the Great Human Rights Declarations of the past two and a half centuries we may even say that as long as there is one crying and starving baby in this world because of lack or rather misallocation of basic commodities this baby will be stunted in its growths, possibly killed by starvation and deprived of his or her own research into the nature and essence of truth. It is equally curious how on that exceedingly basic level of lack there is no clash of civilizations at all!

A man or woman starved over long periods of time will eventually be even too weak to fight. There is no clash there, only ineluctable, mordant lethality. If we can at this point agree that basic needs of human beings have to be covered before any thing at all is likely to happen, be it clash or understanding or whatever else we need to look at the concept of the clash of civilizations. Civilization is a complex term that has undergone various redefinitions and redeterminations from eminent minds over the past century or so. Oswald Spengler coagulated it into a hierarchy of barbarism – civilization – culture in an ascending valuation and order that became widely accepted and with Hitler's hatchet men trying to speedforce the world of the 20th century into its image it became with equal speed unacceptable. The Holocaust is under no circumstances whatsoever acceptable as a "means" to whatever end. Or to quote the Russian economist Yawlinsky: "Whenever you try to live by the ends justifying the means, you end up with even destroying those ends!"¹ Consequently this hierarchy was abandoned by cultural philosophers and economists in the second half of the 20th century and a more egalitarian side-by-side arrangement became generally agreed upon. Francis Fukuyama proclaimed the "end of history" in a Hegelian figure of thought, implying that with the end of the Cold War history as we know it most popularly as the history of conflicts and conquests had come to an end as well as he further implied the blessings of globalization for large majorities. Samuel Huntington disagreed: We are not ready for that! he postulated and with the hindsight of 9/11 it indeed appears that we weren't! Yergin and Stanislav approached the same issue not from the angle of cultural philosophy, but from the perspective of economic and political history. Will governments or free markets control what Lenin had called the "commanding heights", the key industries & natural resources? they asked.

¹ . Yergin, *op. cit.*

This is actually a slanted way of inquiry. Yergin and Stanislav put themselves roughly into the shoes of the current President of Russia who says: We are going to show the West that we are the better capitalists after all! The real issue or “clash” is not whether free-markets or governments will control the so-called ‘commanding heights’, but whether democracies will be eviscerated by an elitist consumerism of multinational corporations and a planet will be depleted of all its vital resources for the foolish resources profligacy of a exceedingly precious minority. Huntington maintained that the East-West Cold War clash of the competing ideologies of Capitalism and Communism would be replaced by the North-South religious clash between the civilizations of the West and the “Rest”. West here has assumed ideological proportions above and not necessarily coincident with its geographical position. Hernando de Soto maintained that no wealth can be continuously created and shared unless the property of the wealth producer is secured. If we look at the picture that is painted by Huntington after closer analysis it becomes painfully clear why it is so familiar? The newly proclaimed clash of civilizations is barely a new face of the old colonialism², with the difference that now the entities holding the commanding heights don’t even need to invade the so-called less developed countries physically. They can afford to wait to have the denizen of those areas come into the so-called civilized world as illegal immigrants and be expelled only after their labor force has been abused and exploited on a below minimum wage level. Henry George in his examination and confrontation of economic Social Darwinism has shown in his *Perplexed Philosopher* that we only apparently have shed the fetters of ethnic slavery, while we are still in the majority of the world population bearing the fetters of *economic* slavery. And the work of Sen and others demonstrates amply that the

² . An insight first brought to our attention by Nibaldo Aquilera

proclaimed “clash of civilizations” is only apparently a religious clash, it is much more essentially and fundamentally a fight of the vast areas of the globe who are deprived of their proper resources management and who are deprived of the brunt of the fruits of their labor and the return of their capital against those who try to hold and monopolize these commanding heights. Marilyn Waring in her extensive studies and research of female labor in the so-called developing Pacific rim nations demonstrates conclusively that - in addition to that - half of humankind is further left out and enslaved. “If women counted” and those mothers in the researched regions - who work 365 days a year, seven days a week, 18 hours a day, for no pay, no health care, no vacation, no social security, and no retirement benefits – were to go on strike, the global economy - and not just the regional ones - would break down within a matter of days! If Fukuyama and Yergin tried to herald and usher in the “new golden age” of globalization and Huntington still had some qualms about it, we have to step back in time half a century to see what Karl Popper had to say to see if he cannot help us elucidate the matter? Popper in his seminal work *The Open Society & Its Enemies* maintains that “open societies”, that is free-market democracies, cannot afford to let themselves be undermined by such sinister obscurantists such as Plato, Hegel, Marx, and their economic and political followers. The totalitarian manner in which they tried to indoctrinate their students were – so Popper – the death knell to any kind of democracy at all. Only falsifiable empiricism and piece-meal social engineering could save us from this dire threat. Many statesmen and captains of industry and finance have pronounced themselves in concurrence of this open-society theorem. Among them George Soros and the former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt. Now if we may leave Marx out for a moment, whom so ever was responsible for crashing the

planes into the Twin Towers on September 11th and I think there is the largest possible, even conceivably worldwide consensus - that they were neither Platonics or Hegelians.

To return to the economic roots of the so-called clash of civilizations: Obviously there may not be an ethnic, religious, or ideological hierarchy of barbarism – civilization – culture. There may, however, as the Cambridge educated Indian philosopher and statesman Sri Aurobindo suggests an ascending scale of consciousness which – mirroring evolution itself from the material, vital, mental to the spiritual – need not stop at human beings but may in the millennial future develop higher, more conscious, more harmonious types of life who, we may assume safely, will have no difficulties providing food, shelter, clothing for all living and sentient beings of our globe! In lack of any other more compelling social paradigm we may emulate those heuristically hypothesized beings of the future. And as Henry George has rightly suggested, if we manage “to take the wedge out of society” that elevates some into wealth and depresses many into poverty we may have no more clashes between civilizations and barbarisms, or between civilizations and cultures or conflicts between any of the three, but we may open our vistas to higher conquests. And we may discover that the search for the criterion or touchstone of truth and for the proper accompanying methodologies are not a private, singular affair, but a general, integral one and that we cannot arrive at any conclusive touchstone as long as one last baby is still threatened with starvation on earth.

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