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Clash of civilizations?

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There have been numerous fault-lines in society in the past due to religion, race, social class and nation. Current fault-lines relate to demography: the West has a falling population whereas many countries elsewhere in the world are undergoing large population growth; net emigration has been replaced by immigration. The previous Western dominance in economic activity has also changed and the balance has moved east. These and other factors are considered as pointers to the future.

One of the most burning and ongoing discourse of our time is the 'clash of civilizations', a problem addressed by Samuel P. Huntington in his 1993 study, and then in his 1996 book, *The Clash of Civilizations. Remaking of World Order*. It became the central question of international politics after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks against New York and Washington, and the United States' anti-terror war against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

The final sentence of Huntington's book expressed the conflict in the following way: 'In the emerging era, clashes of civilizations are the greatest threat to world peace, and an international order based on civilizations in the surest safeguard against world war' (p. 321).

It is, however, highly questionable whether the fault-lines of the existing world order cross the borderline of various contemporary civilizations. One may describe the same conflicting tectonic powers along traditional fault-lines, which separate religions, classes, races and nations. The Christian–Muslim conflict was dominant for centuries in south and south-east Europe. At one time, a vast literature discussed the 'Yellow Danger', i.e. a racial fault-line between the West and the rising Asian power. The literally burning conflict (signalled by burning ghettos) of the United States during the troubled 1960s was considered to be a 'black and white', i.e. also a racial, conflict. Most of the tragic conflicts in Europe during the 19th and 20th centuries, which led to the massive slaughter of tens of millions of people, emerged as national conflicts, often about disputed areas and borders. Class conflicts, peasant revolts and workers uprisings shocked societies

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and resulted in bloody regime changes throughout the centuries. A long-lasting ideological and political conflict became the main fault-line after the Second World War, until nearly the end of the century. In the West this conflict was described as being between democracies and dictatorial regimes, or 'open' and 'closed' societies, while in the East it was a conflict between socialism and imperialism.

These fault-lines and sources of conflict, nevertheless, often overlapped each other. The black versus white conflict in the United States, which is considered to be a racial conflict, might also be interpreted (especially its origin) as a class conflict. Class conflicts, on the other hand, sometimes became internationalized. That was the theoretical basis of Italian Fascism, which adopted Enrico Corradini's nationalist concept and declared a war of the 'proletarian nations' against the 'bourgeois nations'. In a similar way, Andrei Zhdanov introduced the Soviet Cold War doctrine and characterized the main international fault-line as the antagonism between the countries of 'proletarian internationalism and world imperialism'.

Using another paradigm, the same conflicts may be interpreted as the revolt of the poor, backward peripheries against the rich core of the world system. A great many international conflicts, including the 'Yellow Danger', when it emerged, were basically part of a core– periphery antagonism.

Those conflicts, which nowadays were interpreted as 'clashes of civilizations', might also be described in traditional religious, racial, national and class categories, or as a classical version of the well-known core–periphery confrontation. This is especially true if we consider that several non-Western countries — which, however, have caught up with the West, such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong, despite of all the differences in civilization and cultural traditions — may be considered as part of the Western or, better, international world. Former poor peripheries, cradles of authoritarian, dictatorial regimes, which were often rocked by civil wars, if economically successfully, have caught up with the core countries and became an integral part of Western civilization, as in the case of the post-Second World War Mediterranean world and Ireland.

Independently of the paradigms and terminology that we use regarding civilization, religion, class, national and core–periphery conflicts, some basic elements of the conflicts are the same. I will discuss two of them in this essay: the *demographic* and *economic* factors, which have always strongly influenced existing world orders and power relations.

Let us list some basic facts. The modern world order of the 18th and 19th century was based on a spectacular rise and dominant role of Europe. In 1700, hardly more than one-fifth of the world population lived in Europe and the

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so-called 'white colonies', i.e. the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. By 1913, this percentage had increased to more than one-third.

The 19th century was a period of the 'demographic revolution' of Europe. The population of the old continent in one single century increased two to two-and-half fold. The population of the 'white colonies', because of 50 million emigrants from Europe, increased by tenfold. At the same time, the population of Africa and Asia only increased by 68% and 38% respectively. The 'coloured continents' thus did not experience a demographic revolution in the 18th and 19th centuries; they maintained a slow population growth.

Economic relations were transformed even more dramatically in that time. The economic power of the West became unchallengeable. In 1700, it produced roughly 30% of the world's Gross Domestic Product, that is of all the agricultural, industrial output and services. By 1913, this share jumped to 70%! Before the First World War, in the former 'white colonies', the quantity of goods and services surpassed Asia and Oceania by seven times. In Western Europe, on average, each person had six-and-half times more goods and services than in Africa. This represented a decisive change in economic power relations.

In addition, Western civilization, in spite of the more backward state of its peripheries, was literate, while the other continents remained mostly illiterate. Average life expectancy at birth increased to 50 years in the West, but remained about 25 years in Asia and Africa. Without doubt, the core of the world order became Europe and its overseas 'extensions'. All of the leading European powers built up huge colonial empires. The three leading European powers produced roughly 70% of the world's industrial output and trade. The British pound sterling became the world's money, equal with gold, and the British economists, Adam Smith and David Ricardo, established modern economics — an economic and moral value system, based on British experience and interest. The principles and values were dictated by Britain, which increased its population by four times and became the world's first industrial nation.

The 20th century transformed the world system. The rival great powers of the core countries declined in a bloody death dance of wars and the countries at the peripheries of the world system bitterly revolted against the domination of the core. Two gigantic world wars, Fascist and Communist revolutions shocked Western civilization and undermined its unquestionable dominance.

It is difficult to evaluate the role of the drastic change in demographic trends in this transformation. Europe's population growth, nevertheless, slowed down; moreover, during the last decades of the century, it began declining. On the other hand, Asia, Latin America, and other 'civilizations' (or peripheries) entered into the period of their demographic revolution. The population of Asia during the first half of the 20th century grew twice as fast as in the 19th century and, in the second half of the century, four times faster! Population growth in Africa between 1950

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and 2000 was five times faster than in the 19th century. Asia, by the end of the 20th century, increased its population from less than 1 billion to 3.5 billion people. Africa and Latin America, by 2000, had five and six times more inhabitants respectively than a century before. As a consequence, the share of the population of the Western civilization, after its spectacular rise during the 18th and 19th centuries, steeply declined from one third to less than one fifth of the world population during the 20th century.

The slowing down of population growth and later absolute decline occurred in a Europe of extremely rapid economic growth. It led to full employment but also to an increasing immigration from poor countries of the peripheries. Europe, the continent of emigration in the 19th century became the dream world of immigration in the second half of the 20th century. From the 1950s on, millions of Turks, Moroccans and others, people from other civilizations or the periphery of the core, arrived in Europe. They were actually invited to do various kinds of jobs. Eventually, roughly 5 million immigrants settled in Germany, representing about 8% of the population. In France, this number is nearly 4 million. In the United States, millions of Latin Americans and Asians are immigrating legally and illegally every year. Nowadays, nobody speaks about the American 'melting pot', which made Americans from Irish Catholics and Russian Jews in one to two generations during the 19th century. Instead, being politically correct, 'multi-culturalism' became the slogan and makes natural cultivating the native Spanish language or wearing traditional Muslim dresses. In some parts of the United States, mostly in Florida, California and Texas, former minorities slowly became majorities, and kept their traditional cultures.

Immigration to countries of western civilization may be discussed as the creation of 'alien civilization islands' within the Western world. Using the core–periphery paradigm we can speak about 'Third World islands within the First World'. This development also has an explosive potential.

Turning to the other factor, economic performance, the 20th century also brought a dramatic change. The Western world had an exceptional prosperity and the fastest growth ever with an annual growth rate of about 4% during the last third of the century. In spite of this, however, the previously unquestionable economic role and dominance of the West was challenged.

The Western world, nevertheless, not only preserved its economic leadership but even increased its overwhelming advantages. The speedy technological development of the century was led by the Western core. In an advancing globalization process, Western multinational companies are the main players. Educational advantage became greater by the end of the 20th century than ever before. On average, one-quarter, and in some cases even 60%, of the relevant age group are enrolled in higher education. On average, each citizen spends 13 to 18 years in school. In Africa, at the other extreme, illiteracy is still dominant. In the

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Western world, a worker produces 25 to 30 dollar value in an hour, in Latin America only 5 to 10 dollars, in India, China, and Indonesia only 1 to 3 dollars. In North America and Western Europe, per capita goods and services are 5 to 7 fold more than in Asia and 15 to 18 times more than in Africa.

The abyss between the advanced core (enlarged by several highly developed Asian countries) of the world system and the economically less developed peripheries (or between various continents and countries with different religions and between different civilizations) is getting to be less and less tolerable. In 1913, income differences between developed and less developed areas were in the ratio 10 : 1. By the mid-century, the ratio was 25 : 1, and by the end of the 20th century it was 40 : 1, i.e. four times more than in 1913.

Dangerous income disparity, the contrast of deep poverty and great riches is a ticking time bomb. The dangers have become even bigger since the peripheries of the world system, or the non-Western civilizations, besides their demographic explosion, also became significant factors in the world economy. Although the value of per capita output is still low in those areas, countries with above or near to one billion inhabitants, such as China and India, and several other countries produce a huge aggregate output and, as a consequence, even relatively poor countries represent enormous economic power.

Europe's share in the world's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has thus declined from nearly half to less than a quarter. Western civilizations together dropped their share from 70% to hardly more than half of world's GDP. Asia, Latin America and Africa, on the other hand, increased their share from less than a third to nearly the half, and more or less caught up with the West.

Several social factors changed as well. Average life expectancy at birth (except Japan) is still highest in the West. In the United States and Western Europe, it reaches 77–78 years, but in Latin America and Asia it is also 66 and 67 respectively (in Japan 81), but in Africa it is only 52. This Western 'advantage', however, is getting be a disadvantage since the share of the elderly, mostly retired, population is rapidly increasing, while the younger generations, because of sharply declining birth rates, are shrinking. Welfare expenditures are consequently soaring and becoming intolerable, even for the rich European countries. The miraculous achievements of the European welfare states are undermined and major reforms and adjustment are required.

Demographic changes and economic trends, of course, are only part of a complex, huge package of social, cultural, and economic differences among various civilizations, or between poor peripheries and the rich core. Increasing disparity or levelling differences do not mean an unavoidable clash between civilizations or regions.

The relativism of post-modern social theories, by rejecting the possibility of differentiation between advanced and backward, and seeing only cultural

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diversities, elegantly positions itself outside the reality of a historical dilemma. The world-order, based on the interplay of an advanced core and backward peripheries, or various diverse civilizations, requires solutions to prevent bloody conflicts and the tremendous potential of a future explosion. A new world-order, based on the new realities of the world system requires better mutual understanding and cooperation. The end result of the ongoing transformation is still open. Western civilization, or the rich core, might defend its position by using its overwhelming military–technological superiority. The need of a new post-Cold War world-order might evaporate and the world might be ruled by world disorder. 11 September 2001 signalled this possibility. One may not give up the hope, however, that the world will learn the lesson, as it did after the two World Wars and the Great Depression, and establish a much better organized and institutionalized world system. In this case, building up a new world system with new institutions, guaranteeing better and long-lasting security, and organizing a much more fruitful collaboration around the globe might follow.

About the Author

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