



FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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Source: *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 76, No. 2 (Mar. - Apr., 1997), pp. 166-169

Published by: Council on Foreign Relations

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20047955>

Accessed: 24/09/2009 02:27

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Culture Clash-ification

A Verse to Huntington's Curse

Frederick S. Tipson

We owe to Samuel Huntington a potent provocation,
A trenchant tract to counteract a clear exaggeration:
The notion that the West has won, its culture now supreme,
His book rejects—and then corrects—as wishful in extreme.¹

For, he insists, our world consists of cultural formations
Arising (and revising) out of eight great civilizations.²
He sets our pulses pounding and our wisdom teeth to gnashing
With come-to-blows scenarios of different cultures clashing.

This is of course a tour de force, but somewhere in the tour,
Huntington has been undone by *paradigm-amour*.
For in his zeal to wheel and deal in fundamental frameworks,
He misses cues and misconstrues just how the global game works.
What Sam doesn't seem to get, despite the implications,
Is that the game has been reset by telecommunications.



Networks and computing make the difference fundamental,
By skewing and redoing social bonds—and governmental.
Since entity identity is much more problematic,
Crash-courses in world politics should not be so dogmatic.

FRED TIPSON'S at AT&T, though not the Verse Division. The views expressed (you might have guessed) are lacking supervision.

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For cultures have been compromised, foundations have been shaken;
Resistant values often overwhelmed or overtaken.
These bouts are seldom brittle, like tectonic plates colliding,
But mushy in the middle—more like pools of ink eliding.

The economic pressures for survival and performance
Have helped to steer the atmosphere to cultural conformance.
The reach of voice and video is widely so invasive,
They bleach each local culture like a very harsh abrasive.

Each center hones distinctive tones, yet even these evolve,
So neither core is like before, and outer realms dissolve.
And though we tow our sentiments and symbols from the past,
Their meaning has been leaning as their context is recast.
While all the cards are shuffled and the deck's in disarray,
The task is how to reavow the order of the day.



Yet Huntington is skeptical of cultural convergence,
And won't endorse the course of what is widely in emergence:
A market-based and liberal-laced embrace of competition,
Against which local cultures often brace in opposition.

These global/local battles are recycled and reheated
In country after country where these ruptures are repeated:
The worldly cosmopolitans confronting long tradition;
Though neither strand may take command, all culture's in transition.

¹ Among the recent essayists he wishes to refute
Is one who sees the past as a prolonged progressive route,
A histrionic, Hegelistic, dialectic drama:
The "end of history" thesis framed by Francis Fukuyama.

² He puts on tap a global map depicting nine divisions,
But then proceeds (because he needs) to make repeat revisions.
Six are clearly central—though their scope remains dynamic:
Western, Hindu, Sinic, Latin, Japanese, Islamic.
But Orthodox and African might also give us trouble,
And Buddhist is the shrewdest, since it may just be a double
[Therevada and Mahayana/Lamaist].
Because so much depends on it, he really should define
If the mix is just those six—or seven, eight, or nine!

Frederick S. Tipson

His model may appear to be well-grounded in the past,
But Huntington has pitched his product much too hard and fast.
As he explores these culture wars, he seems to be inviting
What used to be a weakness of the school of “realist” writing,

Ascribing to a concept, like a culture or a state,
A physical reality which doesn't quite equate.
This realist bard from Harvard Yard distorts important factors,
Converting complex cultures into unitary actors;
What Morgenthau and Wolfers did with power among nations,
Huntington has nearly done with full-scale civilizations.



The West, he thinks, is better off consolidating ranks,
Resisting multicultural promoters and their planks,
For cultural dilution means political exposure,
A kind of mind pollution which detracts from value closure.

On human rights the West retains no copyright or patents;
Reforms of basic norms is not a test among combatants.
And so, despite his histrionic altitude and brilliance,
He overstates the length and strength of cultural resilience.

China doesn't merit a description as Confucian
After what has happened since the Maoist Revolution.
Mao's ideas were “Western”—mainly Marxist and Hegelian,
Confused less with Confucius than with Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*—

And surely Deng (although he's sung of spiritual pollution)
Has made the pitch that getting rich can be its own solution.
It isn't that Confucianism isn't there at all,
But, rather, it has undergone enormous overhaul.

Likewise, growing NATO's writ by moving east its proxy
Only reignites the frights of Russian orthodoxy.
It strikes me as a dangerous form of policy confusion,
Boosting culture clashes through a self-fulfilled conclusion.

His quickness has the slickness of a Disney-style cartoon,
The feeling of a foray, or a major trial balloon.
His book conveys a challenge, like he wants us to refute him,
Daring us, by scaring us, to doubt him or dispute him.

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Which is fine for academic-argument-displaying
As long as someone powerful won't act on what he's saying.
Because the final irony of Huntington's portrayal
Is that in *other* countries he may make his biggest sale.

Politicians prone to pick what's overripe or rotten
May resurrect a culture that is gone but not forgotten,
Building on the current state of cultural confusion
To craft a cult of closure or a culture of exclusion.
We publish at our peril and we magnify the dangers
By lending credibility to cultural strangers.



I prefer a paradigm intent on integration,
The framework for a future forged by acts of innovation:
Taking expectations from technology and trends
And staking aspirations on the future that impends.

All this implies a vision less fixated on our seams
And giving much more weight to global specialized regimes:
Those critical components of a global public order
Of commonsense consensus, both cross-culture and cross-border.

History's indispensable to shape our understanding,
But it needs to be there at the takeoff, not the landing.
To find our voice and tools of choice in shaping human futures,
We need to nurse that vision not with scalpels, but with sutures.
Huntington as scientist may well deduce his stances,
But Huntington as moralist might just reduce our chances.