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- [Radio](#)
- [TV](#)
- [Shop](#)
- [News](#)
- [Sport](#)
- [Local](#)
- [Children](#)
- [Science](#)
- [Environment](#)
- [more Topics](#)
- [help](#)

Perspective

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Stop the clash

[Hide Transcript](#)

Transcript

We are all familiar with the 'clash of civilizations,' the concept associated with the Middle Eastern historian and professional anti-Palestinian Bernard Lewis, and the Cold-War political scientist and English-language advocate Samuel Huntington. In the post-Soviet 1990s, these influential intellectuals turned to culture for geopolitical explanations. Lewis coined the expression 'clash of civilizations' to capture the difference between the *separation* of church and state that he argued had generated the economic and geopolitical success of the United States, versus their *unity* in Islamic nations, which he thought had produced *those* countries' subordinate status. Forget Yanqui support of authoritarian anti-democrats in the Arab world, or *coups* that furthered oil exploitation-Islamic *ressentiment* was all about the US insisting that Caesar get *his* due, and god his. Huntington appropriated the 'clash of civilizations' to argue that future world-historical conflicts would not be 'primarily ideological or primarily economic,' but 'cultural.'

The "clash twins" theory-of-almost-everything has gained immense attention over the past decade, notably since September 11 2001. In the United States, their Olympian grandiosity has been lapped up

by news media ever-ready to construct what the cultural critic Edward Said called 'a cartoon-like world where Popeye and Bluto bash each other.' Journalists promote the notion of an apocalyptic struggle between good and evil, plundering Lewis and Huntington on the differences between Western and Islamic culture. Across the daily press and weekly and monthly magazines of ruling opinion, Islamic violence is explained as a rejection of freedom and technology-never as the act of subordinated groups against dominant ones, as if casting things in that way would somehow justify terrorism. The *New York Times* and *Newsweek* magazine gave Huntington room to account for September 11 in terms of the thesis, while others, including progressives, communitarians, and neoliberals as well as neoconservatives, took up the Lewis-Huntington conceit as a call to empire. Arab leaders met to discuss the impact of, and as the US occupation of Iraq entered its third year, military commanders and senior non-commissioned officers were required to read Huntington's work (along with the fiction of VS Naipaul, and a copy of *Islam for Dummies*).

Not everyone was so taken with these ideas. UNESCO's Director-General, Koichiro Matsuura, prefaced the Organization's *Declaration on Cultural Diversity* with a rebuttal, and the cartoonist Máximo constructed this dialog alongside the tumbling World Trade Center: 'Choque de ideas, de culturas, de civilizaciones' [Clash of ideas, of cultures, of civilizations] another say's 'choques de desesperados contra instalados' [the clash of the desperate against the established]. Israel's *Ha-aretz* regarded the 'hegemonic hold' of the Lewis-Huntington thesis as 'a major triumph' for Al Qaeda, and the *Arab News* typified it as 'Armageddon dressed up as social science.' Several academic studies have countered Lewis and Huntington's assertions about growing ethnic struggle since the Cold War, and a unitary Islam opposed to a unitary West. The clash-of-civilizations thesis does not work, for instance, if you apply it to Iran supporting Russia against Chechen rebels, and India against Pakistan. But why bother with world-historical details when you are offered international relations without the politics?

Huntington's recent critique of US hispano hablantes (Spanish speakers) as threats to an English culture that was supposedly the bedrock of the United States is his latest foray into the public sphere. Once more, awkward facts counter his assumed clash of civilizations:

- just 21% of third-generation Latinos identify with their countries of origin
- they have much more conservative views on immigration than do recent arrivals; and
- they are mostly monolingual English-speakers

This messy reality must be left out for Huntington's thesis to flourish-along with the fact that his beloved early Protestant Anglo settlers, whose ethos was supposedly central to the United States, were caught up with burning witches, haranguing adulteresses, and wearing foppish clothing and wigs, than with birthing liberal democracy.

The work of Lewis and Huntington neglects the material causes of conflicts over money, property, and

politics. It is morally, pragmatically, and empirically flawed. Time to separate the clash twins, and put their theories to bed. Good night, boys. Sleep tight, now.

Guests

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