Huntington, Hanson and the Clash of Civilizations

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Samuel Huntington’s ‘clash of civilizations’ thesis is reportedly the latest sensation to hit America’s conservative foreign-policy establishment. Francis Fukuyama—who’s infamous report of history’s demise proved to be greatly exaggerated—has fallen from favour, and Huntington has taken his place in the limelight. The Economist recounts that, at a recent dinner in Washington, Fukuyama sat quietly while ‘Huntington held centre stage. Nearly everyone in the room assumed that America was doomed to clash with rival civilizations abroad.’ Such an influential thesis clearly requires closer examination in Australia—and not only as a window to the occult world of the conservative American mind. More significantly, in the midst of Australia’s Hanson debate Huntington’s thesis could confer illusory intellectual credibility on Pauline Hanson’s mindless mantra of monoculturalism.

The Harvard Professor and the Queensland fish-and-chip shop proprietor are improbable allies, but their views of Australian politics are strikingly concordant. Both argue controversially that Australian attempts to integrate with Asia through Asian immigration and development of special regional relationships entail a fundamental challenge to Australia’s Western cultural identity. Pauline Hanson has so far failed to establish any intellectual credibility for this view with her alarmist diatribes, in which she credits Asian immigrants with the impressive feat of ‘swamping’ the remaining ninety-six percent of the population without emerging from their ‘ghettos’. In contrast, Huntington’s argument is articulate and superficially plausible. In his 1993 Foreign Affairs article ‘The Clash of Civilizations?’ and his 1996 book The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order, he argues that affinities within and antagonisms between ‘civilizations’, the broadest cultural entities, are shaping a new global political order. He claims that in this new world order the most pervasive conflicts will be between different cultural groups, particularly those situated on the ‘fault lines’ between civilizations. According to Huntington, Australia is caught on the fault line between Asia and the West; as such, he portrays it as a ‘torn country’—culturally Western, but trying to ‘redefine itself as an Asian society’. On this basis, Huntington concludes that Australian attempts to integrate with Asia must be viewed as hostile acts against the culture of Western civilization.

The Economist has suggested that Australia’s Asian integration debate vindicates Huntington’s thesis by exposing an Australian community divided over the choice between cultural membership of Western and Asian...
It is argued here, however, that this interpretation of the Australian debate is founded on a misrepresentation of the intentions of Australia’s Asian integrationists. Thus, although Australia’s Asian integration debate is a cultural conflict of sorts, the nature of this conflict bears no resemblance to the clashes over ‘basic’ and ‘immutable’ cultural differences which Huntington’s ‘clash of civilisations’ thesis diagnoses. Proponents of Asian integration do not advocate the defection from Western to Asian civilisations integral to Huntington’s ‘torn country’ model of cultural conflict; although they are promoting cultural integration with Asia in two senses, neither involves the Asianisation of Australian culture entailed in Huntington’s model.

The first sense in which proponents of Asian integration advocate cultural integration is as a means to achieving successful economic and political integration. In this endeavour, they propose that Australians need to develop more interpersonal links with Asian societies and a better understanding of Asian cultures, but they do not consider that this should or need happen at the expense of Australia’s Western cultural foundations. That is, they promote an ‘integration’ based on an awareness of and respect for cultural difference, rather than one based on the accomplishment of cultural homogeneity.

One of the most influential accounts of the way in which Australia should pursue integration with the Asian region is contained in the Garnaut Report on ‘Australia and the Northeast Asian Ascendancy’. This report includes an account of the cultural dimension of this integration; hence, an examination of this account provides an insight into the nature of the cultural changes supported by proponents of Asian integration. The two avenues to cultural integration proposed in the report are the promotion of Asian immigration and the raising of cultural awareness through the teaching of Asian languages and Asian Studies in Australia. An examination of the rationale for these measures reveals that the primary objective underpinning them both is the promotion of greater awareness of and respect for Asian culture in Australia, rather than the importation of the culture as a substitute for Australia’s own which Huntington’s model would involve.

According to the report, Asian immigration should be encouraged, not as a means to Australia’s cultural assimilation into Asia, but as a means to the establishment of networks of personal contacts between Asians and new Australians, and to the heightening of regional cultural awareness within the Australian community. In advocating ongoing Asian immigration, Garnaut observes that past migration from East Asia has been valuable because it ‘has established a base of personal experience and links back into the region’. That is, migrants are not valued as members of an Asian community, with the associated capacity to transform and Asianise Australian culture; rather, they are valued as members of an Australian community, with a special capacity to enhance Australia’s international relations.

The report further emphasises the importance of Australians being educated in Asian studies and Asian languages, with the intention of preparing ‘Australians for living productively in close contact with Northeast Asia’. Again, it is clear from the language used that Australia’s culturally distinct status is to remain intact throughout the integration process; there is a clear distinction...
between the notion of assimilation and that of 'close contact'. The fact that Garnaut recommends similar 'Australian Studies' courses for Asian nations confirms that the objective is understanding, not adoption, of cultural practices; if cultural adoption were intended, there would be no role for such a reciprocal cultural exchange.

While acknowledging that 'cultural relations are of particular importance' in developing relationships within Asia, Garnaut maintains that 'Australia is strikingly different from any country in Asia.' His view that Australia is culturally unique in Asia and should remain so has been echoed by the political leaders heading the push into Asia. Paul Keating, one of Australia's most avid integration proponents, has insisted that Australian culture will retain its distinctive character throughout the process of regional integration; even when speaking to Asian audiences he has maintained that Australia is not trying to become Asian in any more than a broad geographical sense. Thus, although Huntington is right to say that some Australians advocate a form of cultural integration with Asia, he has misinterpreted the nature of this 'integration'; in fact, they advocate an integration based on working with Asians rather than one based on becoming Asian. In the absence of any attempts to adopt Asian cultural practices, Huntington's claim that elements in Australian society are attempting to make a civilisation shift from the West to Asia rings hollow.

The second sense in which proponents of Asian integration advocate cultural integration is in identifying aspirations for a new Australian identity. In this endeavour, Asian cultures are promoted in Australia as part of a fundamentally Western and distinctively Australian program of multiculturalism, rather than as part of the assimilatory program of Asianisation which Huntington's model would involve. That is, the new conception of Australian cultural identity being advocated is indigenous rather than Asian in character.

The idea that Asian cultures can change and enrich Australian society without challenging its essentially Western character consistently underpins the commentaries of integration proponents. In response to the Hanson debate, Paul Keating gave a speech outlining the nature of the positive cultural impact which he considers Asian immigration to be having on the Australian community. In his speech entitled 'The Monoculture Myth', he endorsed the cultural impact of Asian immigration, not on the grounds that it has helped Australia become a more 'Asian' place, but on the grounds that it has helped Australia become 'a far more open, creative, dynamic, diverse and worldly place.' Although he lauded the cultural changes which this has involved, he also emphasised that the fundamental and distinctively Western aspects of Australian culture are not negotiable. He stressed:

that the first loyalty of all Australians must be to Australia, that all must accept the basic principles of Australian society. These include the Constitution and the rule of law, parliamentary democracy, freedom of speech and religion, English as the national language, equality of the sexes, tolerance.
Kim Beazley has also advanced this idea that the promotion of Asian cultures in the context of a program of multiculturalism enriches and strengthens, rather than challenges and conflicts with, Australia’s Western cultural heritage:

It is important also to point out that older Australian traditions have been enriched by this process [of multiculturalism]. Long standing democratic values and institutions have been reaffirmed. Political and economic freedom has been enhanced. Family life, so important in a stable and nurturing society, has been strengthened by its significance across cultures.11

These ideas are embraced across the political spectrum; the Coalition parties also endorse this view of Asian cultural integration as entirely compatible with Western culture. In their official policy statement on immigration and multiculturalism they affirm that ‘all Australians should be free to preserve, celebrate and share their cultural traditions within the framework of a socially cohesive, tolerant and harmonious nation united by common goals, values and an overriding commitment to Australia.’ 12

These statements make nonsense of Huntington’s claim that Asian integrationists want Australia to defect from the West and adopt the cultural practices of Asian civilisations. It is clear that Australia’s cultural challenge cannot be reduced to a simple choice between two civilisations, and similarly it is clear that Australians are not attempting to make such a crude choice. Many Australians have realised something which Huntington apparently has not — that cultures are not inherently antagonistic, but can instead provide each other with new sources of stimulation and strength. Although Hanson and her supporters may view their choices in Huntington’s stark terms, the debate in which they have — perhaps unwittingly — become embroiled is not a simple ‘clash of civilisations’; the cultural changes which they are resisting are not processes of Asianisation but developments of a Western multiculturalism. The cultural clash evidenced in Australia does not signify a clash between two civilisations; rather, it is a clash between two aspirations for a distinctively Australian but unnegotiably Western, cultural identity. Clearly, Australia’s political debates do not resound with the collision of Huntington’s cultural tectonic plates, but with the calls of Australian people for a secure and distinctive Australian identity in a rapidly changing world.

In the introductory chapters of his book, Huntington attempts to account for the simplifications and distortions in his analysis, claiming that his thesis is not a work of social science, but aspires merely to present a ‘paradigm’ for interpreting the evolution of post-cold war politics.13 He employs the analogy of a map, endorsing John Lewis Gaddis’s suggestion that ‘cartography, like cognition itself, is a necessary simplification that allows us to see where we are, and where we may be going’.14 Huntington’s paradigm, however, fails this test of useful cartography, showing us neither where we are as a nation, nor where we should be going. Unfortunately, responsible policy making is not as simple as getting ‘from one big city to another on a major expressway’,15 as his analogy implies. Huntington’s map is a socially disorienting directory, charting only the path to
moral and intellectual destitution which Hanson has so notoriously forged. Huntington fails to realise that complexities do not obscure the political landscape, like detail on a major road-map; conversely, they constitute it. Huntington and Hanson both show, in their different ways, that if the complexities are stripped away from our political countenance, all that remains is a distorted visage of tribalism and prejudice.

Ultimately, examination of the Australian example which Huntington presents to substantiate his thesis reveals that his analysis rests on glib assumptions and simplistic misrepresentations. With this thesis, Huntington has attained the status of a tabloid academic, ready to sacrifice accurate and socially responsible analysis for a sensational headline. The Clash of Civilizations has been a sell-out at the academic news-stands, but in true tabloid style, its substance falls well short of its eye-catching claims.

ENDNOTES

5 ibid., p. 308.
6 ibid., p. 332.
7 ibid., p. 319.
8 Paul Keating, 'Australia, Asia and the New Regionalism' (Singapore Lecture 1996), Institute of Southeast Asian Studies 1996.
10 ibid.
14 ibid., p.30.
15 ibid., p.31.