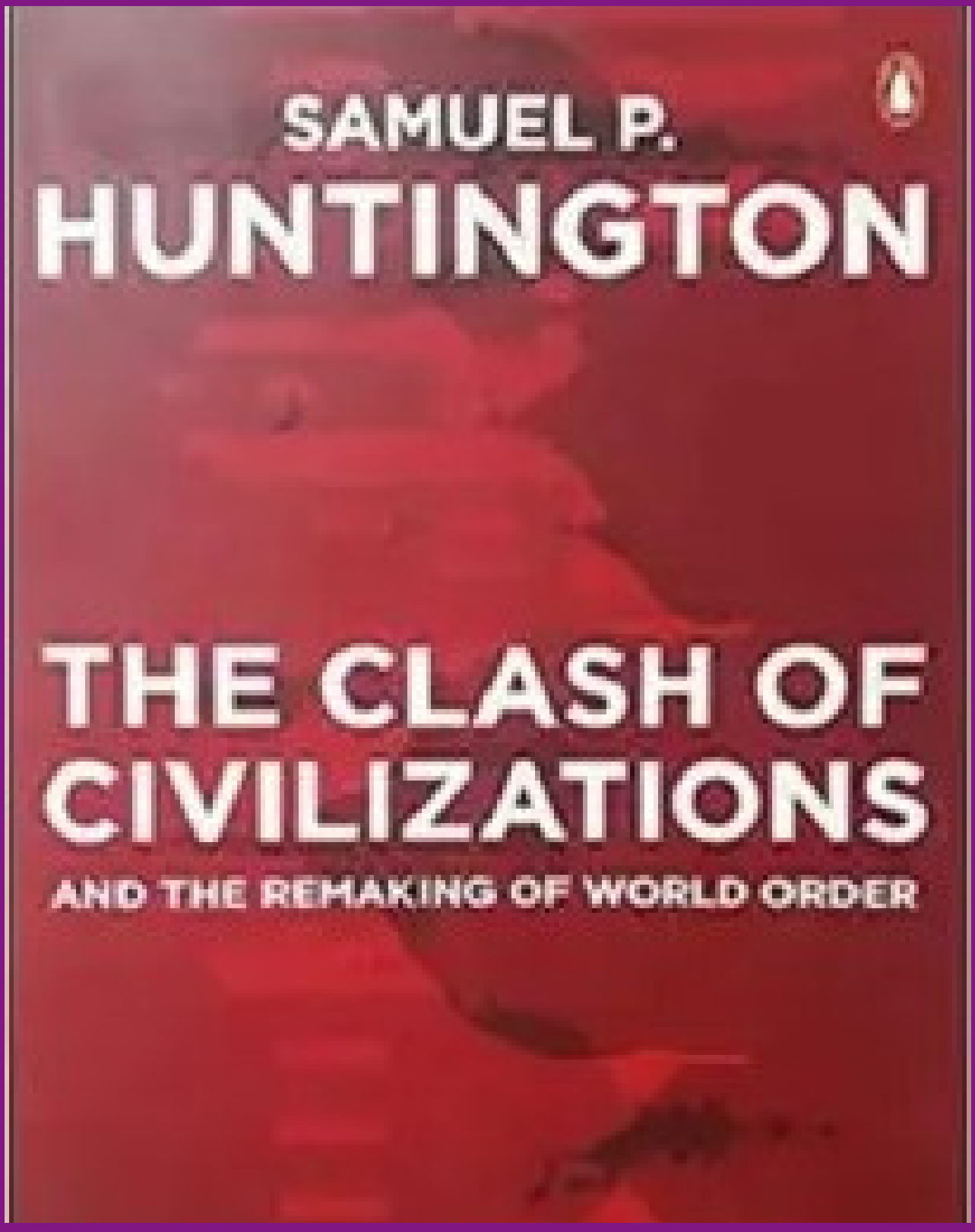
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BOOK REVIEW

THE CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS AND THE REMAKING OF WORLD ORDER

Authored by Samuel P. Huntington



Author and Context

Samuel Phillips Huntington (1927-2008) was an American political scientist. He taught at Harvard and also coordinated security planning for the National Security Council during the Carter administration. He is most well-known for his contribution to late twentieth century debates surrounding the emergence of a new world order post-Soviet disintegration in 1991. His article in Foreign Affairs, titled “Clash of Civilizations?” in 1993 grew out of his response to his student, Francis Fukuyama’s 1989 “End of History” thesis wherein the latter had remarked that the endpoint of man’s ideological evolution had been reached. The book, an expansion of his 1993 article, asks what will characterise world politics now that ideological contestation is over.

Central Argument

Huntington’s answer is culture. In other words, he claims that in the post-Cold War world, people will distinguish themselves not on the basis of ideological, political or economic factors, but on the basis of cultural identities, which at the broadest level of identification are civilizational identities. Huntington proclaims the arrival of a new ‘multicivilizational’ and ‘multipolar’ world where civilizational affinities (or antagonisms) would decide the future alliances, divisions, and conflicts. He argues that the most dangerous conflicts in the contemporary world would happen along the fault lines between the major civilizations. Civilizational blocks, he describes, would constitute states organized in concentric circles around the ‘core state’ which would play the leadership role within that bloc and assume responsibility for maintaining peace within it. He suggests that the West’s power is declining relative to other civilizations, and that the West should renounce attempts to impose its values on others. He calls the belief in Western universality false, immoral and dangerous.

Analytical strengths

The greatest strength of Huntington’s thesis is that he made scholars and leaders take identity, religion, and history seriously, especially at a time when many thought that liberal values and markets would bring the world closer. Many of Huntington’s judgments have aged well. The importance accorded to civilizational identities has contemporary relevance in so far as nation-states, such as Russia, India, China, and even the United States, identify as distinct civilizations. Some, like Russia and India, strongly advocate for a multipolar world based on civilizations. By fiercely arguing in favour of not one, but many distinct civilizations, and calling upon leaders of the ‘West’ to give up attempts at universality, Huntington has upheld the principle of diversity. Moreover, his argument that universalism leads to imperialism is valuable both as a way to understand colonial history and as a warning for the future.

His idea of core states is also useful. By imagining each civilization as a set of concentric circles around a dominant state, he gives readers a simple way to compare how distinct civilizations are organized: the Sinic has one dominant state, i.e. China, the Slavic-Orthodox has Russia at the centre, and Islam has no core state, which explains why Muslim-majority states act separately.

Another important observation Huntington makes is that the effectiveness of a regional organization is inversely proportional to the civilizational diversity of the membership. South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is an example that illustrates this point. Owing to India-Pakistan tensions, high-level engagement has remained frozen since the last summit in 2014.

Weak points

One of the problems arises from how Huntington relies heavily on civilization as the main way of grouping states. His own descriptions have shown how uneven and crises-ridden these groupings can be: the Sinic world is a set of layers with contested regions (Xinjiang, Tibet), and the Russian orthodox civilizational bloc also consists of a surrounding ‘buffer’ of Islamic states which attempt to resist Russian domination (Chechens, Tatars, Central Asians).

One judgment that did not stand the test of time concerns Huntington’s prediction of Russia-Ukraine relations. In his view, Ukraine is a textbook example of a ‘cleft’ country divided between an Orthodox East and a Western-oriented West. Since he believed that civilization was starting to matter more than national identity, he thought a split along this fault line was a real possibility. The outcome he considered to be most likely, however, was that Ukraine would stay united and independent, though divided internally, and would cooperate closely with Russia, aided by a partially shared culture. Instead, Russia’s 2022 invasion has forcefully occupied parts of Ukraine, and even though Ukraine stays united and independent, it is definitely not at peace with Russia.

Final Remarks

Huntington’s book is worth reading, but it is more useful as a lens to look at the world, and less as a forecast. He was right that cultural identities matter, and right to question Western universalism. But civilizations are less unified than he suggests, and Ukraine shows that states often put their interests before shared culture. Best read with its critics.

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