

Gumilev and Huntington: Approaches and Terminologies

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In the 1990s I began to prepare a thesis on 'Inter-ethnic relations in the Northwest Caucasus from the 13th to the 19th centuries'. From the outset of this project, I ran up against two difficulties: which approach to follow and which terminology to use.

At that time, in Russia, publication was beginning of a collection of books by Lev Gumilev, a professor at the University of Leningrad and a former prisoner of the Gulag. The terminology he was applying seemed, *a priori*, logically structured and well adapted for explaining ethnic history in Russia. It cut sharply through the terminological confusion current in the domain of ethnic history of the period. His approach to ethnic history was quickly appropriated by the Russian state which was seeking to fill the post-Soviet ideological vacuum and clearly establish a new political order after the secessionist revolts of the minority nationalities.

In 1996, four years after Gumilev's death (15 June 1992), Samuel P. Huntington's book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* was published in the United States. This *Clash of Civilizations* made a strong impression on me, because of the similarities not only of its approach but also of its ideas to those of Gumilev.

Of course there are also differences, but these are what philosophers speak of as being no more than 'accidents'.¹ Gumilev and Huntington have both tried to give a general explanation for new phenomena in world history that have been emerging over the last few decades. Despite some differences in terminology, the theses of Gumilev and Huntington are close to being analogous one with the other.

A short biographical comparison between these two incontestably great figures in the field of modern ethnic history and political theory reveals two notable individuals who came from two very dissimilar backgrounds, but who in the same period both emerged as the pre-eminent ideologues of their respective states. Which gives us much material for reflection.

Lev Gumilev was the son of two great Russian poets: Nikolai Gumilev, who was shot by the Bolsheviks, and Anna Akhmatova, the most famous Russian woman

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poet of the 20th century. Gumilev himself was twice imprisoned in the Gulag. A professor at the University of Leningrad (Saint-Petersburg), he was also the 'enfant terrible' of Soviet social science (more specifically of Soviet ethnography) and as well had a reputation as a geographer, ethnologist, historian and philosopher – all in all a man of immense erudition. He drew attention to himself as a stern opponent of Academician Bromlej, who represented the official line of Soviet ethnography, but with whom in fact he did not differ in any fundamental respect as regards the determination of what constitutes an ethnic group, except in so far as Gumilev described it in terms of a metaphor of energy, whereas Bromlej kept within an interpretation which gave most weight to psychological factors.

Huntington's biography, at least until the publication of the book *The Clash of Civilizations*, was the exact inverse of that of Gumilev. He was a Professor at Harvard, and a founder and one of the directors of the journal *Foreign Policy*. At the present time (2006) Huntington is still teaching at the same university, in particular giving courses on Religion in Global Politics, Culture and Politics, and War, Peace and Global Politics.

In 1993, *Foreign Affairs* published his article 'The Clash of Civilizations?'.² The article provoked within three years more debate than any published in the United States since the 1940s. The public was variously impressed, intrigued, outraged, frightened and perplexed by his basic premise, which may be summarized as follows: 'the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations'. At all events, this article (and obviously the book published four years later under the same title) have struck a sensitive chord with the peoples of all civilizations.³

Like Gumilev, Huntington became transformed into the 'enfant terrible' of public opinion, indeed, of world political science. He was sharply criticized in Europe, France included, where public opinion rejected his ideas foreseeing wars between civilizations. The former American ambassador to France, Felix G. Rohatyn, has provided an interpretation for these criticisms: 'Whereas we Americans are becoming more bellicose and unilateral, France and Europe are bringing about the European integration by attempting to minimize conflicts wherever that might be possible'.⁴

The appeal that authors like Gumilev and Huntington have comes from the fact that they are putting forward a model which is held to describe and give explanations for the new phenomena occurring in world history at the beginning of the 21st century through an explicatory account that is reassuring in its luminous simplicity.

One approach: it's 'the path after one has walked it'⁵ (Georges Dumézil)

The two approaches adopted by Gumilev and Huntington derive from contrasting life experiences and structures for apprehending the world that are *a priori* different, but take their inspiration, so it seems, from the same culturalist sources and paradigms with their quite specific premises.

Gumilev and Huntington both follow a synthetic approach which encompasses the totality of a society. Both are labelled as civilization-historians whose works today provoke heated controversy, directed in particular against their claim to

universal relevance and the validity of their global culturalist explanation of social phenomena and conflicts. For the Russian researcher M. Gukovski, the practitioners of such synthetic methodologies are in the ascendant, in Russia more particularly, where, even more than elsewhere, the crisis of the 'grand paradigm' is being felt; they go on ahead, constructing their theories, while those interested in event-based histories come along behind, 'correcting their specific errors of interpretation as they go'.

These two scholars take their inspiration from a civilizationist model of the world whose foundations were laid by the great Arab historian of the 14th century, Ibn Khaldoun, and developed by Arnold J. Toynbee (1889–1975) in the 20th century. A Hellenist, historian, diplomat and specialist of comparative civilizations, Toynbee sought to derive the laws governing their evolution. His principal work is *A Study of History* in 12 volumes. However, the paradigms adopted by the two specialists differ in several significant points, despite their numerous analogies. One of the most important differences is the conflict-generating character of civilizations put forward by the one, and the emphasis laid on complementarity or emotion by the other. Analogies and differences are observable primarily through their taxonomic systems.

Taxonomic systems of Gumilev and Huntington

Both Gumilev and Huntington make use of systems of classification of elements that allow them to express their fundamental theoretical ideas in an explicit fashion. The main difference between them is that Gumilev proposes a classification which includes all pertinent structural divisions in the socio-cultural taxonomic hierarchy, whereas Huntington makes explicit reference only to the higher divisions, while implicitly presupposing the existence of the lower ones.

The base component of Gumilev's classification is that of the ethnic group (*ethnos*).⁶ Several ethnic groups form a 'super-ethnicity' (*Fr. super-ethnie*). Each ethnic group comprises a number of sub-ethnic groups which in turn have their origins in smaller and less fixed units.

For Huntington, the base concept is that of the 'civilization' which corresponds to Gumilev's 'super-ethnicity'. When referring to the Muslim civilization, for example, Huntington distinguishes within it 'many distinct cultures or sub-civilizations . . . including Arab, Turkic, Persian and Malay'.⁷ These would correspond to the 'ethnic groups' (*ethnos*) of Gumilev's classification.

According to Gumilev, an 'ethnic group' (*ethnos*) consists of 'a body of individuals naturally grouped together on the basis of a long-standing behavioural stereotype existing as a system standing in opposition to other similar systems'. For Huntington, 'culture' is a term signifying a human society based on 'the set of acquired forms of behaviour' and 'the set of intellectual aspects proper to a civilization or nation'. Generally speaking, then, Gumilev's '*ethnos*' and Huntington's 'culture' would, in the given context, be synonymous.

'In a world where culture counts, the platoons are tribes and ethnic groups, the regiments are nations and the armies are civilizations.'⁸ If this statement of

Huntington's is transposed to the language of Gumilev, the following result is obtained: 'In a world where "ethnos" are more and more significant, the platoons are tribes and sub-ethnic groups, the regiments are the ethnic groups and the armies are the super-ethnicities.'

It can thus be clearly seen that the taxonomic principles are absolutely identical in spite of a distinct terminology.

Huntington's comparison of civilizations with armies is not fortuitous. His conceptual stance is expressed much more in conflictual terms than Gumilev's, and this has influenced to a large extent his choice of terminology. Where Gumilev speaks of 'zones of contact', Huntington uses terms like 'lines of division' or 'fault lines'. When Gumilev uses the term 'complementarity', Huntington speaks of relations between civilizations that are 'more or less conflictual'.

Over all, we can label Gumilev's system of classification as an ethnic taxonomy whereas Huntington's is a cultural taxonomy; the term 'culture' in this context refers to 'the set of intellectual aspects characteristic of a civilization or nation' and 'the set of acquired forms of behaviour in human societies'.⁹

The super-ethnicities (civilizations) and 'the mirage of immortality'

According to Gumilev, a super-ethnicity is a system comprising several 'ethnic groups' and standing in opposition to all other analogous entities. For Huntington, 'a civilization is the broadest cultural entity'¹⁰ or 'the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species'.¹¹ In brief, 'civilizations are the biggest "we" within which we feel culturally at home as distinguished from all the other "thems" out there'.¹² As we can observe, the notions used by Gumilev and Huntington are essentially identical. Their approach in terms of civilizations is also analogous. In summary, it is the following: 'While civilizations endure, they also evolve. They are dynamic: they rise and fall; they merge and divide; and as any student of history know, they also disappear and are buried in the sands of time'.¹³

The different sequences of this evolution can be apprehended in different ways. Huntington quotes the English historian Carroll Quigley, whose principal work is entitled *The Evolution of Civilizations*, as affirming that these latter '[move] through seven stages: mixture, gestation, expansion, age of conflict, universal empire, decay and invasion', while for Toynbee, 'a civilization [arises] as a response to challenges and then [goes] through a period of growth involving increasing control over its environment produced by a creative minority, followed by a time of troubles, the rise of a universal state, then disintegration. While significant differences exist, all these theories see civilizations evolving through a time of troubles or conflict to a universal state to decay and disintegration'.¹⁴ All things considered, this could appear a simple banality, were it not for the observation that this 'stagewise' hypothesis concealed behind its apparent luminous simplicity a determinist conception of universal history and of human societies which grants to culture alone the role of institutional and conflictual determinant.

From Gumilev's point of view, each ethnic group and super-ethnicity (civilization)

also passes through a series of stages among which can be distinguished periods of expansion then internal conflict, followed by the 'golden age' of the ethnic group or super-ethnicity followed by its decline.

For it is inevitable that civilizations (super-ethnicities) decline and disintegrate. That is why Huntington uses Toynbee's expression 'the mirage of immortality' in reference to peoples blinded by the golden age of their civilizations.¹⁵

Now, a few words concerning the expression 'The clash of civilizations', Huntington's chief concept: 'Civilizations are the ultimate human tribes, and the clash of civilizations is tribal conflict on a global scale',¹⁶ 'the intra-civilizational clash of political ideas spawned by the West is being supplanted by an inter-civilizational clash of culture and religion'.¹⁷ Huntington hammers this peremptory assertion so forcefully as to lead many to take it as a grid for the reading and analysis of the many conflicts that have occurred since the end of the Cold War, without any further question.

With this expression, the Huntington who is the specialist of comparative civilizations wins out over Huntington the political scientist. He projects his interpretation as being a contemporary reality: that the conflict of civilizations is a fact. For Gumilev, it is an obvious historic verity that peoples 'within this broader entity (the super-ethnicity) are not constrained to follow the same political ethos, on the contrary, they often enter into sharp conflict'.¹⁸ But such conflicts never turn into wars of extermination. In contrast, 'confrontations between the various super-ethnicities often [at least partially] transmute into genocide and subjugation (for example, the wars in ancient China with the peoples of the steppe, the extermination of Native American tribes of North America by Europeans, etc.)'.¹⁹

Gumilev does allow that while contacts between super-ethnicities (civilizations) are occasionally neutral, their consequences are most often extremely negative.²⁰

Such an opinion is shared by Huntington: 'Relations between groups from different civilizations . . . will be almost never close, usually cool and often hostile'.²¹ To avoid catastrophe, both Huntington and Gumilev propose an absolute principle of behaviour in relation to the contact zones (Gumilev) or the lines of division or fault lines (Huntington). It is the *abstention rule*: ' . . . in short, the avoidance of major inter-civilizational wars requires core states to refrain from intervening in conflicts in other civilizations. This is a truth that some states, particularly the United States, will undoubtedly find difficult to accept. This *abstention rule* that core states abstain from intervention in conflicts in other civilizations is the first requirement of peace in a multi-civilizational, multi-polar world.'²²

This idea of Huntington's echoes one that Gumilev was already expressing in the 1970s as well as in his book which was not published till the 1990s: 'To pretend to ignore ethnography and believe in chimaeras on this subject may have tragic consequences. Individual humans are different, and peoples are more so. Behavioural responses which are normal among Arabs may be ridiculous for the French, insulting for the Turks and Mongols and abnormal for the Chinese. That is why the optimal mode of ethnic contact is one of symbiosis, where peoples co-exist by maintaining peaceful relations between them without interfering in their neighbour's affairs. . . .'²³ The intent of the two authors is not only performative but also prescriptive.

Complementarity = the global politics of civilizations: new alignments (both more and less conflictual)

Complementarity (Gumilev's notion) and alignments that may be either more or less conflictual (Huntington) are the key notions that will govern inter-cultural (inter-civilizational) relations. According to Gumilev, complementarity is a subconscious sense of sympathy or antipathy shared by the members of an ethnic group which serves to determine the distinction between 'one's own' and 'strangers'.²⁴ In Gumilev's view, complementarity can be positive or negative (one never speaks of political will), a dichotomy which corresponds to Huntington's 'more conflictual or less conflictual alignments'. By emphasizing the 'often ambivalent' complexity of relations between states belonging to different civilizations, Huntington confirms that 'yet, broad trends are evident and plausible generalizations can be made about what seem to be the emerging alignments and antagonisms among civilizations and core states'.²⁵ (But it is no longer clear here whether the author is speaking as a political scientist or as the spokesman for a policy of which he is, among others, a privileged instigator.)

The eastern frontier of western civilization

This issue, which was largely theoretical 10 or 15 years ago, is becoming more and more a practical, pragmatic and political one as a result of European integration and the extension of Europe towards the East. In 2004, the possibility of membership in the European Union being extended to further Eastern European countries (Romania, Bulgaria) and especially to Turkey aroused intense debate throughout Europe over the line of the said frontier.

The question is straightforward: where is the eastern boundary of Europe located and 'who should be thought of as European and hence as potential members of the European Union, NATO and comparable organizations?'²⁶

What responses do Gumilev and Huntington give to this question?

For Gumilev, the eastern boundary of western civilization and the western boundary of eastern Europe, which is described as being part of Eurasia, is defined 'by the line in the air corresponding to the January isotherm which crosses the Baltic states, western Belarus and Ukraine and extends down to the Black Sea'.²⁷ The average January temperature to the west of this isotherm is positive (in degrees Celsius); to the east it is negative.²⁸

This geographic or, if preferred, climatic line, and hence a definition that is 'objective, natural and scientifically neutral', forms at the same time, says Gumilev, the inter-civilizational frontier between two super-ethnicities: the West and Eurasia. By laying down this boundary which is purely geographic by nature, he thus eliminates forthwith all social, political or historical determinants. This amounts to setting the inter-civilizational line of demarcation within nature, hence immutably related to it.

What does Huntington have to say on this?

The most compelling and persuasive answer to these questions is provided by the great historical line that has existed for centuries separating Western Christian peoples from

Muslim and Orthodox peoples. This line dates back to the division of the Roman Empire in the fourth century and to the creation of the Holy Roman Empire in the tenth century. It has been roughly in its current place for at least five hundred years. Beginning in the north, it runs along what are now the borders between Finland and Russia and the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) and Russia, through western Belarus, through Ukraine, separating the Uniate west from the Orthodox east, through Romania between Transylvania with its Catholic Hungarian population and the rest of the country, and through the former Yugoslavia along the border separating Slovenia and Croatia from the other republics. In the Balkans of course, this line coincides with the historic division between the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires. It is the cultural border of Europe, and in the post-Cold War world, it is also the political and economic border of Europe and the West.

The civilizational paradigm thus provides a clear-cut and compelling answer to the question confronting West Europeans: Where does Europe end? Europe ends where Western Christendom ends and where Islam and Orthodoxy begin.²⁹

In providing a reply to the question relating to the eastern frontier, Huntington thus advances both historical and religious arguments. A sole difference arises between the two theorists in relation to the southern part of the inter-civilizational boundary. In Gumilev's projection, after crossing the Ukraine, the frontier terminates at the Black Sea; following Huntington's perception, however, having cut through Romania and Moldova, it turns westward into the Balkans, separating Slovenia and Croatia from the other Balkan states.

This line of division between two, or rather three, civilizations (in its southern sector) corresponds to the eastern frontier of Catholic Europe in Mercator's atlas of 1595.³⁰ According to Huntington, it has long remained more or less stable.

If the civilizational point of view elaborated by these two authors is adopted, it allows the affirmation that the integration of Europe corresponds to the drawing together of European countries located within the bounds of a particular civilization (the Christian, and by implication Catholic, civilization), whose reality thus appears to be incontestable.

In 2004, a first stage of this fusion was definitively achieved. The question now being put – of whether the European community should extend to include other states which belong to different 'civilizations' – would therefore seem to run counter to European historical experience. No one is at present capable of foreseeing the consequences of such experimentation.

The historical situation is constantly evolving. At the present time, change is being brought about as a consequence of the intensity of migration flows and inter-marriage which, some day or other, will no doubt profoundly modify the basis of the 'civilization' of Europe and so its own boundaries.

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The different terminologies of Gumilev and Huntington effectively obscure identical notions belonging to the same taxonomic system, with both taking as their point of departure base concepts elaborated by civilizationist historians of the preceding generations.

We no doubt are fortunate to be living in a transition period of civilization theory which allows both existing and emergent models to be seen in perspective and the relative and circumstantial character of these theories to be taken into consideration. Better understanding can thus be had of the relativity of these discursive models that are attempting to describe the world, and of where they might not allow full understanding. Huntington seems to be aware of this epistemological phenomenon:

This picture of post-Cold War world politics,³¹ shaped by cultural factors and involving interactions among states and groups from different civilizations, is highly simplified. It omits many things, distorts some things and obscures others. Yet if we are to think seriously about the world and act effectively in it, some sort of simplified map of reality, some theory, concept, model or paradigm is necessary. Without such intellectual constructs, there is, as William James said, only 'a bloomin' buzzin' confusion'.³²

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Translated from the French by Colin Anderson

Notes

1. *Translator's note*: To qualify what he means here by 'accidents', the author of the article quotes at this point the *Robert Quotidien* definition of the French word 'accident' as 'Ce qui s'ajoute à l'essence et qui peut être modifié ou supprimé sans altérer la nature' [*That which stands in addition to the substance and which can be modified or suppressed without changing the basic nature.*] The *Oxford English Dictionary* (online edition) gives the following English definition of 'accident' when used in a philosophical or theological context: 'A property or quality not essential to our conception of a substance; an attribute. Hence, by extension, any accidental or non-essential accompaniment, quality, or property; an accessory, a non-essential.'
2. *Foreign Affairs*, 72(3) summer 1993: 22(28).
3. Huntington (1997: 11).
4. Rohatyn (2004).
5. Chevrel (1991: 126).
6. *Translator's note*: The author of the article uses the French word 'ethnie' to transcribe the Russian term used by Gumilev which in turn appears to be derived from the Greek *ethnos*. The French definition of 'ethnie', given by the *Petit Robert* dictionary, is 'Ensemble d'individus que rapprochent un certain nombre de caractères de civilisation, notamment la communauté de langue et de culture [*Grouping of individuals associated by a certain number of shared characteristics of civilisation, notably a common language and culture*]. The dictionary illustrates the meaning by describing the French 'ethnie' as incorporating the French-speaking communities of Belgium (the Walloons), of Switzerland and of Quebec as well as those of France itself. 'Ethnic group' comes closest to this meaning in English, though interpreted in a broad rather than a narrow sense.
7. Huntington (1997: 45).
8. Huntington (1997: 128).
9. *Translator's note*: The definition given here is the translation from French into English of the *Robert Quotidien* definition quoted by the author of the article. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (online edition) gives the following comparable definition for 'culture': 'the civilization, customs, artistic achievements, etc., of a people, esp. at a certain stage of its development or history'. In illustration it quotes the *British Journal of Sociology* XIV(21) 1963: 'By "culture" is meant the whole complex of learned

behaviour, the traditions and techniques and the material possessions, the language and other symbolism, of some body of people.'

10. Huntington (1997: 43).
11. Huntington (1997: 43).
12. Huntington (1997: 43).
13. Huntington (1997: 44).
14. Huntington (1997: 44).
15. Huntington (1997: 301).
16. Huntington (1997: 207).
17. Huntington (1997: 54).
18. Gumilev (1993: 522).
19. Gumilev (1993: 523).
20. Gumilev (1993: 523).
21. Huntington (1997: 207).
22. Huntington (1997: 316).
23. Gumilev (1990: 174–5).
24. Gumilev (1993: 501).
25. Huntington (1997: 245).
26. Huntington (1997: 158).
27. Gumilev (1992: 21).
28. Gumilev (1992: 21).
29. Huntington (1997: 158).
30. Lavrov (2003: 375).
31. As being multipolar and multicivilizational (*Huntington's note*).
32. Huntington (1997: 29).

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