

The Real
New World Order?

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In the current volatile climate both politically and socially it may be wise to take a deep breath and consider a few things about our current situation--being careful to avoid the forbidden topics of our esteemed society. Well, almost avoiding them.

Much of the pre-Katrina/Rita world was preoccupied with lands far away although much closer in our minds' eye--Iraq, Afghanistan, etc. In that landscape, with the current deployment of the 101st yet again upon us, a little journey into political philosophy seems in order.

Welcome to the world as seen by Benjamin Barber.

For 32 years, Barber was at the Walt Whitman Center for the Culture and Politics of Democracy at Rutgers University in New Jersey. He is currently the Gershon and Carol Kekst Professor of Civil Society and Distinguished University Professor at the University of Maryland and a principal of the Democracy Collaborative.

His 1995 book, *Jihad vs McWorld*, Barber presents a vision of two worlds--one a world of Jihad in which "culture is pitted against culture, people against people, tribe against tribe." The other sphere is McWorld, "onrushing economic, technological, and ecological forces that demand integration and uniformity and mesmerize peoples everywhere with fast

music, fast computers, and fast food.” Barber’s first view progresses through a “detrribalization” of much of the world, “a Jihad in the name of a hundred narrowly conceived faiths against every kind of interdependence, every kind of artificial social cooperation...against technology, against pop culture, and against integrated markets; against modernity itself;...

The second paints a future in shimmering pastels, a busy portrait of onrushing economic, technological and ecological forces...MTV, Macintosh, and McDonald’s--pressing nations into one homogenous global theme park, one McWorld tied together by communications, information, entertainment, and commerce. Caught between Babel and Disneyland, the planet is falling precipitously apart and coming reluctantly together at the very same moment.”

(Whew--deep breath!!!)

Now, here comes the problem and the core of Barber’s analysis--both forces exist, sometimes in really weird juxtaposition. “Fundamentalists plot virtual conspiracies on the Internet” The most immediate way this was brought home to me was in one of the early video tapes of Osama Bin Laden walking among the rocks and hills of somewhere and then sitting to explain his Jihad against the west. Go back and look at the pictures--on his wrist is a very expensive looking digital watch.

(see attached picture after page 10)

What really has disturbed Barber is that these forces seem to need each other--they are interdependent and have in common "anarchy".

Democracy is not a friend to Jihad, but neither does it find much to reinforce it with McWorld. Is being able to buy a Coke and a Big Mac while waiting in line to view Lenin's body in Moscow's Red Square contributing to their advancement into the world of democracies? Both Jihad and McWorld undermine sovereign nation-states. Wal-Mart is moving into China! If the Jihadist promotes hatred and exclusion, McWorld promotes consumption and profit. Where is the common good? While Barber sounds at times more like a preacher than a political theorist his concern is with the absence of trust and belief in democracy on the part of both of these forces and the consequences for the world where "the forces of commerce and the forces reacting to commerce are locked in struggle..."

that, as Thomas Hobbes reminded us, we may be free to do as we choose, but as a consequence our lives could be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

Two years earlier, in an article in *Foreign Affairs*, Samuel P. Huntington asked about the new realities in "The Clash of Civilizations?". The subsequent book was published in 1996. Samuel Huntington is Albert J. Weatherhead III University Professor and Chairman of the Harvard

Academy of International and Area Studies. At Harvard he has served as director of the Center for International Affairs, chairman of the Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies, and chairman of the Department of Government. This year he is teaching Contemporary Global Politics, Religion in Global Politics and Comparative Politics Research Workshops. Huntington's analysis of the mid-1990s situation began in a familiar place.

For 40 years students and practitioners of international relations thought and acted in terms of a highly simplified but very useful picture of world affairs, the Cold War. The world was divided between one group of relatively wealthy and mostly democratic societies, led by the United States, engaged in a pervasive ideological, political, economic, and, at times, military conflict with another group of somewhat poorer, communist societies led by the Soviet Union. Much of this conflict occurred outside these two camps in countries which often were poor, lacked political stability, were recently independent and claimed to be nonaligned. The Cold War paradigm could not account for everything that went on in world politics, such as the Sino-Soviet split. Yet, as a simple model of global politics, it accounted for more important phenomena than any of its rivals; it was an indispensable starting point for thinking about international affairs; it came to be almost universally accepted; and it shaped thinking about world politics for two

generations. The dramatic events of the past years have made that model obsolete. There is clearly a need for a new model that will help us to order and to understand central developments in world politics. What is the best map of the post-Cold War world?

The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order is an effort to lay out elements of the post-Cold War world. As with any construct, there is much the civilization paradigm does not account for, and critics had no trouble citing events—even important events like Iraq's invasion of Kuwait—that it does not explain and would not have predicted.

Nevertheless, Huntington found the world moving rapidly from global bi-polar politics to multi-polar and multicivilizational. The modern world has indeed made strange allies, if not bedfellows. “People use politics not just to advance their interests but also to define their identity. We know who we are only when we know who we are not and often only when we know whom we are against.” Why do nation-states behave as they do? Increasingly we (the U.S.) may be facing a world of six major powers--US, China, Japan, Russia, India, and (if they can get their factions together, Europe.)

(The whole European unity idea is another evening--sigh of great relief!!)

Huntington saw the superpower rivalry being overtaken by a clash of civilizations--those being "the WEST" and the "non-West." Now, for centuries, power and influence was seen in terms defined in Western terms. Sea power, Christianity, classical knowledge, university educations, and the dominance of our technology, prosperity, military power, and political cohesion made those "outside" want to be *in*, and *in* meant being more European/Western. "The revolt against the West was originally legitimated by asserting the universality of Western values; it is now legitimated by asserting the superiority of non-Western values."

I watched *Gandhi* again this summer. It had been years since I had seen Ben Kingsley's performance. But what struck me this time were the obsessions of the young Indian lawyer--so anxious to be European in every way. Gandhi's early ambitions were completely abandoned in his personal transformation into the leader of the Indian independence movement in the 1940s.

Huntington attributes much of the forces unleashed in the world today to a resurgence of religion--far transcending the activities of the fundamental extremists. The irony is that social, economic, and cultural modernization in the last half of the 20th century has produced a need

for stability, identity, and moral values. "Religion, both mainstream and fundamentalist, meets these needs...People do not live by reason alone...the twentieth-century conflict between liberal democracy and Marxist-Leninism is only a fleeting and superficial historical phenomenon compared to the continuing and deeply conflictual relation between Islam and Christianity". Why an enhanced conflict now? First, growing populations of unemployed and disaffected young people. Second, renewed Muslim confidence in their distinctive character and worth. Third, the West's insistence on both maintaining military and economic superiority while trying to make universal its values and intervene in Muslim conflicts. Fourth, we no longer have a common enemy--the communists!! There's no one else around to be a threat. Fifth, increasing contact and intermingling of Muslims and Westerners has decreased tolerance and exacerbated differences. This last point seems to contradict everything we have traditionally been taught to believe about cultural contact and exchange programs, etc.

Islam is convinced of their cultural superiority and obsessed with the inferiority of their power. "The problem for Islam is not the CIA or the U.S. Department of Defense. It is the West, a different culture whose people are convinced...that their superior, if declining, power imposes on them the obligation to extend that culture throughout the world. These are the basic ingredients that fuel conflict between Islam and the West."

These sentiments are not simply Barber & Huntington's. A variety of scholars and government officials have held with their views. But, not all! In October 2001, Edward Said entered the fray with an article in *The Nation* called "The Clash of Ignorance". Said, professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University, died of Leukemia in 2003. In growing from a child of Christian Arab parents in Jerusalem to a Ph.D. from Harvard, Said became one of the most eloquent advocates for the two-state solution for the Palestine question and extremely critical of Arafat and the PLO in the 1990s.

Said's criticism of Huntington was with his constant use of labels (the West; fundamentalist Muslim; etc.) that "mislead and confuse". These tags often attach simplistic generalizations to complex ideas and cultural assumptions. Neither "Our" world nor "their" world is served well by such labeling. "These are tense times, but it is better to think in terms of powerful and powerless communities, the secular politics of reason and ignorance, and universal principles of justice and injustice, than to wander off in search of vast abstractions that may give momentary satisfaction but little self-knowledge or informed analysis. *The Clash of Civilizations* thesis is a gimmick like *The War of the Worlds*, better for reinforcing defensive self-pride than for critical understanding of the bewildering interdependence of our time."

“The bewildering interdependence of our time” may be the most apt of all the musings on today’s realities. Are these just arcane arguments of academic intellectuals trying to out-jargon each other to keep their book sales and their guest lecturer fees high? Are those folks trying to grasp the 21st century in some way that may have meaning? I like to leave more questions than answers, and I hope I’ve done a bit of that this evening.

Sources:

Jihad vs. McWorld by Benjamin Barber © 1995 Times Books, Random House, Inc.

The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order © 1996 Simon & Schuster Adult Publishing Group.

The Clash of Ignorance by Edward Said. *The Nation* (October 22, 2001)

This article can be found on the web at

<http://www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml?i=20011022&s=said>