



# Imperialism and Culturalism Complement Each Other

By Samir Amin (Posted Nov 26, 2024)

History, Ideology, ImperialismLost & FoundFeatured

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*Capitalism is always ready to reward academics and publicists who provide plausible exculpatory explanations for its crises, failures, and crimes. Frequently the most effective are those that play upon the prejudices and superstitions of the prescientific past but in modern (or “post-modern”) and scientific form. Favored alternatives to historical materialist social science have been theories of world-historical process as the working out of closed and separate “civilizations” and “cultures.” These “civilizations” and “cultures” are not explained by history, but instead explain history. One current version is that of the publicist (and Harvard professor) Samuel Huntington, justifying the crimes of imperialism as the product of cultural “incompatibility.” This is merely the most Authorized Version of a noise that can be heard today in all rhythms, tunes, and dissonances, often with its origins in racial pseudo-science only slightly disguised. Other varyingly sanitized and fragmentary versions are sometimes presented as “identity politics” or “communitarianism.” The Egyptian journal Al Ahram asked our good friend and frequent contributor Samir Amin to give his view of Huntington’s theory of “clash of civilizations.” His demonstration of why culturalism and imperialism reinforce each other, and how victims can be led to accept “difference” in place of equality and liberation, is today of potential utility everywhere.*

—The Editors

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Dominant ideologies are by definition conservative: in order to reproduce themselves all forms of social organization must perceive themselves at the end of history. However, the first step of scientific thought consists precisely in seeking to go beyond the vision that social systems have of themselves. The conservative dominant discourse acquires strength through the vulgar practice of tossing together the “values” that it pretends rule the modern world. Into this pot are thrown principles of political organization (notions of legality, of the state, human rights, democracy), social values (freedom, equality, individualism), and principles of the organization of economic life (private property, the “free market”). This amalgamation then leads to the false claim that these values constitute an indivisible whole, arising from the same logical process. Hence the association of capitalism with democracy, as if this were an obvious or necessary linkage. However, history shows the contrary: democratic advances have been won through struggle, and are *not* the natural, spontaneous product of capitalist expansion.

Unless we want the “end of history” to be the end of the history of humanity and the planet through their destruction, capitalism must be transcended. As opposed to previous systems, which took thousands of years to unfold before exhausting their historical potentials, capitalism may ultimately appear as a brief parenthesis in history. In this time the elementary tasks of accumulation were accomplished, but only to pave the way for a superseding social order characterized by a superior, non-alienated rationality and based on an authentic planetary humanism. In other words, capitalism did in fact exhaust its positive historical potential very early on; it ceased to be the means (if only the “unconscious” means) by which progress finds its path, and now it has become an obstacle to progress.

Progress is not here identified as an abstract involuntary product linked with the expansion of capital, but is independently defined through human criteria inconsistent with capital’s real products, which are economic alienation, ecological destruction, and global polarization. This contradiction explains why the history of capitalism has been constituted from its origins by successive contrasting movements. During some periods the logic of capital’s expansion is experienced as a unilateral force, and during others the intervention of anti-systemic forces limits the extent of the destruction inherent in its expansion.

The nineteenth century, with the unequal unfolding of the industrial revolution, proletarianization, and colonization, is characteristic of the first mode of capitalist expansion. But in spite of the hymns to the glory of capital, the violence of the system’s real contradictions was driving history not to its end as announced in triumphalist “belle époque” proclamations, but to world wars, socialist revolutions, and the revolt of the colonized peoples. Re-established in post-First World War Europe, triumphant liberalism aggravated the chaos and paved the way for the illusory, criminal response that fascism was to provide.

It is therefore only from 1945 on, after the failure of fascism was complete, that a phase of civilized expansion was opened through the three historic compromises that Sovietism, social democracy, and the national liberation movements imposed. None of these compromises made a complete break with the logic of capitalism, but all of them imposed upon capital respect for the movements that had resulted from the explosion of the contradictions of capitalism. In their unfolding, these compromises effectively toned down the devastating effects of economic alienation and polarization. But this phase is now over. Progressively eroded by its successes, even if partial by definition, this logic of compromise went down with the collapse of the systems it had legitimated. One can only ask: Has the current return to the triumphalist discourse of liberalism, which believes once again in the end of history, only announced a tragic repetition of the earlier drama’s successive scenes? Has this neoliberalism not already in record time created an ideological void, and brought together the conditions for reinforced polarization?

The victim of this system will certainly react. They are already reacting. But what logic will they develop in opposition to that of capital? What type of compromises will they impose upon it? In the most radical hypothesis, what systems will they substitute for capitalism? The strategies around which popular mobilization had taken place in the preceding period (socialism and nation-building) have lost their credibility today as a result of a lack of renewal in their response to new elements in the permanent challenges of capitalism. One can already see which themes have appeared as substitutes: democracy (always tacitly limited to some privileged group) associated with forms of (usually ethnic) communalism, the recognition of which is legitimated by the “right to difference” and sometimes by ecogism; or cultural, and especially religious, originality.

## II

The idea that cultural differences are not only real and important, but fundamental, permanent, and stable, that is to say transhistorical, is not a new one. It is, on the contrary, the basis of a common prejudice of all peoples at all times. All religions defined themselves in this way—as the end of history, the definitive answer. But progress is critical, social, and historical reflection (a *universalist* advance), and the construction of the social sciences have always required a continuous struggle against this prejudice of cultural immutability. Cultures and religions are continuously changing, and the change can be explained. The question is therefore not to demonstrate once again that this worldview is belied by real history. It is first to know why the absurd idea of “cultures” outside history is being presented today with so much force and conviction and next to understand the results of its political success.

Theories of cultural specificity are usually disappointing because they are based on the prejudice that differences are always decisive, while similarities are the result only of coincidence. The desired results of the enterprise are obtained, *a priori*, on this basis. The differences adduced betray the banality of the reflection involved. To say, as Samuel Huntington does in his famous article *Clash of Civilizations*, that these differences are fundamental because they involve domains defining “relations between human beings and God, Nature, Power,” is at one and the same time to reduce cultures to religions, and to suppose that each culture develops specific fixed concepts of the relations in question in the categories predetermined by Huntington.

But history shows that these concepts are more flexible than is often believed. And that they are found in ideological systems that are inscribed in varying forms of historical evolution according to circumstances independent of the concept themselves. Bad culturalists—are there any good ones?—yesterday explained China’s backwardness, and today its accelerated development, by the *same* Confucianism. The Islamic world of the tenth century appeared to many historians as not only more brilliant, but also as containing more potential for progress than Christian Europe during the same period. So what has changed to explain the later reversal of positions? Religion (more precisely, its interpretation by society), something else, or both? And how did these different instances of reality react with each other? Which were the motor forces? These are the questions to which culturalism, even in formulations more rigorous than that of Huntington, which is a particularly crude version, is indifferent.

Furthermore, which “cultures” are we talking about? Those defined by religious space, by language, by “nation,” by homogenous economic region, or by political system? Huntington has apparently chosen “religion” as the basis for his “seven groups,” which he defines as Occidental (Catholic and Protestant), Muslim, Confucian (although Confucianism is not a religion!), Japanese (Shintoist or Confucian?), Hindu, Buddhist, and Orthodox Christian. Huntington is clearly interested in cultural spaces that potentially explain significant divisions in the world today. There is no doubt, for example, about why he needed to separate the Japanese from other Confucians and Orthodox Christians from Occidentals (is this because in State Department strategy, with which Huntington is openly and closely interested, the potential integration of Russia into Europe remains a veritable nightmare?). Nor is there much question as to why he ignores Africans, who, whether Christian, Muslim, or animist, still have a few specificities of their own (though Huntington’s oversight here perhaps reflects only ignorance and banal racial prejudice), and even Latin Americans, for since they are Christians are they not as “Occidental” as the Occidentals? And, if so, why are they

underdeveloped? It would not be difficult to point out the further absurdities of this badly written page of third-rate Eurocentrism.

Huntington rehearses this elaborate taxonomy to arrive at the astonishing discovery that six of the seven groups are completely ignorant of Western values, among which we find the association by sleight of hand characteristic of the genre: concepts defining capitalism (“the market”) and democracy (associated with capitalism by *a priori* decree, regardless of historical fact). But does the market fare any worse in non-Western Japan than in Latin America? Are the market and democracy not recent phenomena in the West itself? Did medieval Christianity recognize itself in these purportedly transhistorically “Western” values?

Ideologies—especially religions—are no doubt important. But for two hundred years we have been developing an analysis that situates ideology within society, and can identify functional analogies in different societies subject to similar historical conditions. Such analogies among the social functions of religious ideologies can be seen clearly over and above their particularities. In this framework diverse traditional “cultural spaces” have not disappeared, far from it. But they have been deeply transformed from within and without by modern capitalism (what Huntington calls, wrongly, “Western culture”). I have arrived at the conclusion that this culture of capitalism (and not of “the West”) was globally dominant, and that it was this domination that emptied ancient cultures of their content. Where capitalism is most developed its modern culture has been internally substituted for ancient cultures, such as for medieval Christianity in Europe and North America, and in a precisely parallel fashion for the originally Confucian culture of Japan. On the other hand, in the capitalist peripheries the domination of capitalist culture did not fully manage to transform radically the ancient local cultures. This difference has nothing to do with the specific characters of diverse traditional cultures, but everything to do with the forms of capitalist expansion, both central and peripheral.

In its global expansion, capitalism revealed the contradiction between its universalist pretensions and the polarizations it produces in material reality. Emptied of all content, the values invoked by capitalism in the name of universalism (individualism, democracy, freedom, equality, secularism, the rule of law, etc.) come to appear as lies to the victims of the system, or as values appropriate only for “Western culture.” This contradiction is obviously permanent, but each phase of deepening globalization (including the one we are living through) lays bare its violence. The system then discovers, thanks to the pragmatism that characterizes it, the means of managing the contradiction. It suffices that each should accept the “difference,” that the oppressed cease to demand democracy, individual freedom, and equality, in order to substitute the “appropriate” values, which are usually the complete opposite. In this useful model, the victims then internalize their subaltern status, allowing capitalism to unfold without encountering any serious obstacle from the reinforced polarization its expansion of necessity engenders.

Imperialism and culturalism are thus always good bedfellows. The first expresses itself in the arrogant certitude that “the West” has arrived at the end of history, that the formula for managing the economy (private property, the market), political life (democracy), society (individual freedom), are *a priori* interconnected, definitive, and unsurpassable. The real contradictions that may be observed are declared to be imaginary, or are claimed to be produced by absurd resistance to submission to capitalist rationality. For all other peoples, the choice is simple: to accept this false unity of “Western values,” or to closet themselves in their own cultural specificities. If, given the polarization that “market” and imperialism must produce, the first of these two options is

impossible (as is the case for most of the world), then cultural conflict will occupy the foreground. But in this conflict the dice are loaded: “the West” will always win, the others will always be beaten. This is why the others’ culturalist option can not only be tolerated, but can even be encouraged. It only poses a threat to the victims. Given this situation, and contrary to mythological discourse on the “end of history” and the “clash of civilizations,” critical analysis seeks to define the real stakes and challenges. Riddled with contradictions that cannot be transcended through its own logic, capitalism is only a stage in history, and the values it proclaims are presented deprived of their historical context, of the limits and contradictions of capitalism, and thus made empty.

The self-satisfied discourse of “the West” does not respond to these challenges, since it deliberately ignores them. But the culturalist discourse of the victims bypasses them as well, since it transfers the conflict outside the field of the real stakes—these it gives to the enemy—to find refuge in the imaginary space of culture. What matter, then, if Islam for instance is firmly seated at the controls of local society, if within the hierarchy of the world economy the rules of the system lock Islamic societies into the comprador status of the bazaar? Like fascism yesterday, today’s culturalisms work through lies: they are in fact means of managing the crisis, despite their pretensions to constitute its solution. But looking forward, and not back, means the real questions must be faced: how are we to combat economic alienation, waste, global polarization; and how are we to create conditions that allow the genuine advance of universalist values beyond their formulation by historical capitalism?

Simultaneously a critique of cultural heritage suggests itself. The modernization of Europe would have been unthinkable without the critique to which Europeans submitted their own past and their own religion. And would that of China have been begun without the critique of the past, and especially of Confucian ideology, to which Maoism devoted itself? Afterwards, certainly, the heritage (Christian in one case, Confucian in the other) was re-integrated within the new culture, but only after it had been radically transformed by a revolutionary critique of the past. On the other hand, in the Islamic world, the stubborn refusal to engage in any critique of the past accompanies (not by coincidence) the continuous degradation of the countries comprising this cultural space in the hierarchy of the world system.

### III

Usually, after having analyzed a situation, one then reflects on possible future developments. Gradual erosion of the compromises on which post-war capitalist expansion has unfolded has opened a new phase in which capital, freed from any constraint, has attempted to impose a utopia of world management in conformity with the unilateral logic of its financial interests. This first conclusion leads to the identification of the new dual objectives of the dominant powers’ strategy: to deepen economic globalization, and to destroy the political capacity of resistance.

Managing the world like a market implies a maximum fragmentation of political forces, or in other words a practical destruction of state forces (an objective that anti-state ideology attempts to legitimize) in favor of “communities” (ethnic, religious, or other), and in favor of primitive ideological solidarities such as religious fundamentalism. For the project of global management, the United States having become the only global policeman, the ideal is that not one other state (and especially not one independent military power) worthy of the name would survive. All other powers would be restricted to the modest tasks of daily market management. The European project itself is conceived in these terms as the communal management of the market and no more, while beyond its borders maximum fragmentation (as many Slovenias, Macedonias, Chechnyas as possible) is

systematically sought. Themes of “democracy” and “peoples’ rights” are mobilized to obtain results that cancel peoples’ capacity to make use of the democracy and rights in whose name they have been manipulated. Praise of specificity and difference, ideological mobilization around ethnic or culturalist objectives, are the engine of impotent communalism, and shift the struggle onto the ground of ethnic cleansing or religious totalitarianism.

In the framework of this logic the “clash of civilizations” becomes possible, and even desirable. To my mind, Huntington’s intervention on the subject must be read in this way. In the same way as in the past he used to produce texts legitimizing support for Third World dictatorships in the name of “development,” he produces today a text that legitimizes the means deployed to manage the crisis through the polarization of conflicts around “cultural incompatibilities.” This is nothing less than a strategy that imposes an arena of conflict that guarantees victory to “the West,” as I have pointed out.

Events seem to confirm in the immediate term, through the multiplication of ethnic and religious conflicts, the effectiveness of this strategy. But do they therefore prove the thesis of “natural” cultural conflict? I have expressed strong reservations on this subject. Violent affirmations of “specificity” are rarely the spontaneous product of the peoples involved. They are almost always formulated by minorities in power or aspiring to leadership. It is also clear that the ruling classes made most fragile by the global evolution of the system are those that have recourse most frequently to these culturalist or ethnic strategies. This is the case in the countries of Eastern Europe, which have been struck by a cataclysm of uncommon proportions. But it is also the case in the Islamic world and in sub-Saharan Africa, also struck off the list of competitive industrial producers and therefore marginalized in the world system. These negative nationalisms are completely functional from the perspective of capitalist crisis management. Nor has the foreign policy and intelligence establishment of the United States, of which Huntington is a functionary, failed to utilize “difference” and “cultural incompatibility” against popular movements that have offered resistance (within the fading framework of the post-war compromises) to the expansion of capital. Assistance given to figures such as, for example, Savimbi in Angola, Hekmatyar in Afghanistan, and Tudjman in Yugoslavia, shows that the most frightful instances of “cultural conflict” today can be seen as somewhat less than “natural.” Local cultures, in their specificity, and in their relations with the world system and the dominant capitalist culture, are taken by themselves insufficient for the deduction of a general theory, as culturalism would suppose. The true keys capable of explaining the differences between the regions of the world are found *outside* the field of culture. There is no systematic clash of cultures: there are conflicts that are fundamentally of another nature, some of which however include a cultural aspect. Therefore in order to define a strategy for popular struggle, we must start from an analysis of the contradictions of capitalism and of the forms they take in the particular historical period we are living through.

### **About Samir Amin**

Samir Amin (1931-2018) was one of the world’s greatest radical thinkers. Born in Egypt, he served as director of Third World Forum in Dakar from 1980 until his death. He has written numerous articles and books for *Monthly Review* and Monthly Review Press, including *Accumulation on a World Scale: A Critique of the Theory of Underdevelopment* (1974), *The Law of Worldwide Value* (2010), and *Samir Amin: Memoirs of an Independent Marxist* (2018).