

MÁRTON PÉRI**America's watchmen****Samuel P. Huntington and Reinhold Niebuhr****Amerika őrállói****Samuel P. Huntington és Reinhold Niebuhr****Abstract**

*Samuel P. Huntington became one of the most influential and most quoted authors writing about political theory in the end of the twentieth century. His magnum opus, *The Clash of Civilizations* offers a new and challenging theory about how the cultural-political shape of the world will look like in the oncoming years. Huntington advocates for a determining change of paradigm as regards the arising main conflicts. Notwithstanding his originality, he admitted that he was influenced by another key-figure of political theory: by his compatriot and colleague, the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. However, this influence has not gained significant-if any- scholarly attention so far. The present paper will attempt an analysis of this fruitful intellectual relationship.*

Keywords: civilizational paradigm, Samuel P. Huntington, Reinhold Niebuhr, realism, cold war, 21st century

Absztrakt

Samuel P. Huntington a huszadik század végének egyik legbefolyásosabb és leggyakrabban idézett biztonság- és politika tudományi szerzője volt. Leginkább ismert műve, 'A Civilizációk összecsapása...' új paradigmát ajánlott a XXI. század konfliktusainak elemzésére és a világ kulturális és politikai erővonalainak leírására. Kijelenti, hogy az összecsapások természete a jövőben változni fog. Bár nagymértékben eredeti gondolkodó, bevallottan sokat köszönhet a század közepének döntő jelentőségű politikai írójának, a szintén amerikai Reinhold Niebuhr teológusnak. Meglepő módon ez a közismert befolyás a mai napig nem került elemzésre a hazai sem a nemzetközi irodalomban. Jelen írás ezért ennek a gyümölcsöző szellemi kapcsolat elemzésére tesz kísérletet.

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Kulcsszavak: civilizációs paradigma, Samuel P. Huntington, Reinhold Niebuhr, realizmus, hidegháború, XXI. század.

INTRODUCTION

Samuel P. Huntington became one of the most influential and most quoted authors writing about political theory in the end of the twentieth century. His magnum opus, *The Clash of Civilizations*¹ offers a new and challenging theory about how the cultural-political shape of the world will look like in the oncoming years. Huntington advocates for a determining change of paradigm as regards the arising main conflicts will take place in the 21st century between civilizations or cultures rather than nation states.

Notwithstanding his originality, he admitted that he was influenced by another key-figure of political theory: by his compatriot and colleague, Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr was a Calvinist theologian of the twentieth century, who, in his major works as *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics*², his grand oeuvre, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*³, and finally in his *The Irony of American History*⁴.

However, this influence has not gained significant-if any- scholarly attention so far. After a long period of incomprehensible silence, recent scholarship focusing on Huntington's work signals only in very few words the intellectual connection between the two great thinkers. Robert D. Kaplan's article of 2001 entitled "Looking the World in the Eye"⁵ stated in only some lines that Huntington was deeply influenced by the works of Niebuhr. He even quotes Huntington's words from an interview made with him, replying to his suggestion that he was in fact an old-fashioned Democrat: "That's it-that's what I am. As Arthur Schlesinger would say, I am a child of Niebuhr." The article remarks that Huntington admired Niebuhr's "compelling combination of morality and practical realism". Kaplan even goes as far as assuming that "Niebuhr's tragic sensibility constitutes a thread connecting all of Huntington's major works." Niebuhr's influence is manifold on Huntington's work and its significance can be highlighted by the fact that it reached from the formulation of the fundamentals of Huntington's conservatism up to the most concrete strategic steps suggested by him as regards the policy of foreign affairs, mainly in the domains of interventionism and security measures, and finally, to the formulation of Huntington's revolutionary vision about the nature of international conflicts of the twenty-first century. Notwithstanding the weight of this Niebuhrian influence on both the theoretical and practical

¹ Huntington, S. P.: *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon & Schuster (1996)

² Niebuhr, R.: *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics*. New York: Scribner (1932).

³ Niebuhr, R.: *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*. New York: Scribner (1943).

⁴ Niebuhr, R.: *The Irony of American History*. New York: Scribner (1952).

⁵ Kaplan, R. D.: *Looking the World in the Eye*. *The Atlantic*, (2001).

<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2001/12/looking-the-world-in-the-eye/302354/> (last accessed: 12 11, 2015).

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sides of Huntington's work, there seems to be no more detailed account of it, no systematic or even drafted study. Therefore, the present paper will attempt a short analysis of this fruitful intellectual relationship. Although the amount of material would demand a work of a far greater length, due to the limits of the paper I would restrain myself to a very brief, almost sketchy presentation of only some aspects of this relationship, which would signal the depth and the length of a consequent further study in the field.

CONSERVATISM

First of all, there is a common basis of the Conservatism of Niebuhr and Huntington. This can be seen already in their choice of the same author as the source of their conservatism, namely Edmund Burke. Burke was a politician, philosopher and a political theorist living in Britain in the eighteenth century who, although labelling himself as a Whig, articulated a set of essential criteria of conservative theory. He was an ardent promoter and supporter of the American Revolution and of the Catholic emancipation, and an objector of the French Revolution thus becoming the leading figure of the "old Whig" fraction. Although he worked in the same era with such fundamental theorists, the so-called founding fathers of conservatism as Richard Hooker, Marquis of Halifax and David Hume, he was chosen as the author of excellence on the theory of whom both Niebuhr and Huntington built up their version of Conservatism. As there are even closer correspondences between the preferred tenets of his theory in both the Niebuhrian and Huntingtonian texts, we may assume that the choice of Burke by Huntington was directly influenced by Niebuhr. Robert D. Putnam⁶ in his article written on the occasion Huntington's inauguration as the new president of the American Political Science Association also postulates Niebuhr's mediating role between Huntington and Burke. He writes: "Deeply influenced by Reinhold Niebuhr, Huntington saw new virtue in the works of Burke and the American founding fathers, especially Madison and Hamilton."⁷

Niebuhr discovered Burke relatively late in his career, after his interests in social Christianity. However, he worked out his theory of Christian realism relying heavily on the Burkian thought when he applied the ontological theology about the nature of the human person to the formation of a political theory. Huntington already in the early 50's turned to a radical re-appreciation of his status as a Democrat and formulated his position as a practical Conservative with the publication of his article "Conservatism as an Ideology"⁸. Here he presents his idea of a situational conservatism and puts together a list of the major components of the conservative creed, which he defines as the essential elements of

⁶ Putnam, R. D.: Samuel P. Huntington: An Appreciation, PS: Political Science & Politics, (1986) 19 4, pp. 837-845.

⁷ *ibid* p. 838.

⁸ Huntington, S. P: Conservatism as an Ideology. The American Political Science Review, (1957) 51 2, pp. 454-473.

Burke's theory.⁹ The main idea of the article is that the ideology of conservatism serves the defence of existing institutions and order in case of a basic threat to them, therefore even liberals should endorse situational conservatism in such cases of threat, indeed, which happened during the Cold War. This is why he argues: "Today, however, the greatest need is not so much the creation of more liberal institutions as the successful defence of those which already exist. This defence requires American liberals to lay aside their liberal ideology and to accept the values of conservatism for the duration of the threat. Only by surrendering their liberal ideas for the present can liberals successfully defend their liberal institutions for the future."¹⁰ Thus, the Burkeian theories of Conservatism mediated by Niebuhr determined Huntington's policy of internal affairs as well as the foreign ones, defining his political role in the Cold War period.

ORIGINAL SIN

There is an essential point in Huntington's creed, the fourth one, which is worth our particular consideration. It says: "Evil is rooted in human nature, not in any particular social institutions." This point reflects a definite influence of Niebuhr's theory, of Christian realism, which thoroughly imbued Huntington's thought. Niebuhr's political theory was deeply imbedded into Calvinist theology and presented a real break-through as he was an original thinker in both realms and also in combining these two spheres. His main preoccupation was a re-definition of the prospects of the development of all human society considering the ontological nature of man, the most important factor of creating society. This nature he determines as being essentially sinful, on the basis of the ideas of the patristic philosopher and theologian Augustine of Hippo, who created the concept of the *original sin*. As a theologian Niebuhr, after a period in his youth, became an important figure of the neo-orthodox movement, deeply influenced by Karl Barth. However, he developed a unique set of ideas where he opposed the tenets of neo-orthodox Calvinism exemplified by Barth which postulated that the nature of man is altogether corrupted and not capable of any good without divine grace. Niebuhr, being influenced by the works of Augustine, nuanced this view by the adhering to the theory of the original sin of Augustine. Instead of the total corruption he counts with a relative one, thus he claims that man has indeed two possibilities in his actions in the course of history: he can choose both good and evil. However, humans inevitably chose evil as well repeatedly. This concept of sinfulness became an essential element forming and determining history, pre-eminently being manifested as the sin of pride. The human tendency to corrupt good is the factor which has to be taken into account in all phases of history.

Thus, Niebuhr's main asset was to formulate a theory of realism to oppose the illusionary optimism and utopianism of philosophical and political liberalism. The

⁹ *ibid* p. 456.

¹⁰ *ibid* p. 473.

philosophical background began in the Enlightenment with Rousseau, Voltaire, etc. who claimed that that man is essentially good. History is viewed as the progressive realisation of the potential of this goodness inherent in man, and the process of development of society and its institutions is an unbroken line towards perfection in the future. As human reason finds more and more space in creating and ameliorating human institutions it will bring society to a perfect state. Niebuhr contests this view by asserting his main tenet. In Niebuhr's formulation there is always a potential of good but also of bad to be realised on each stage of progress in human civilisation. Evil in human nature will always be an essential factor of forming history.

Huntington applies the same notion of evil existentially inherent in man repeatedly in his great works, thus defining his views. By advocating conservatism in his article "Robust Nationalism",¹¹ he writes: "Original sin is a reality, evil exists in human nature, and since, as Madison said, men are not angels, governments (as well as other social mechanisms) are necessary to control them and then must be controlled themselves. From a conservative perspective, evil can be moderated but it cannot be eliminated." He goes on to define the position of idealism as regards sin: "The opposing view would hold that people are basically good and that evil is the product of the wrong institutions and policies. If men only discover the right institutions and policies, they can abolish war, crime, poverty, inequality and other evils."¹² Both Niebuhr and Huntington attempted to oppose this view through their whole careers.

DEMOCRACY

This view on human nature is the basis on which another axis of correspondences between Niebuhr and Huntington lies, namely their position about the possibility of imposing Western democratic structures on other states, an issue which stood in the centre of the attention of both authors but also on the drives of American foreign affairs policy. As opposed to a great number of enthusiastic promoters of the American interventionist policy, they both posited a more nuanced view on how and where would such an implementation of democracy work with security. Niebuhr wrote that "Democratic self-government is indeed an ultimate ideal of political community. But it is of the greatest importance that we realise that the resources for its effective functioning are not available to many nations."¹³ Huntington takes over the same idea when promoting a more thoughtful and cautious strategy of helping new states implement democracy in his book *Political Order in Changing Societies*¹⁴, a book which ensured him an important place in actual political counselling of the highest instances. The correspondences of underlying Niebuhrian thought and Huntington's suggestions in this field can be traced until the last phases of Huntington's career.

¹¹ Huntington, S. P.: Robust Nationalism. The National Interest, (2000) 58, pp. 31-40.

¹² ibid p. 37.

¹³ Niebuhr, R.: The Gravity of our Contest with Communism. C&C (1961) 21, p. 130.

¹⁴ Huntington, S. P.: Political Order in Changing Societies, New Haven: Yale University Press (1968).

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Huntington's article entitled *Lonely Superpower*¹⁵ and Niebuhr's *The Irony of American History*¹⁶ offer ample room for comparative analysis.

Niebuhr's critique of the optimism of liberalism is reflected also by Huntington's work, and interestingly can be seen as progressively being fortified towards the end of his career. Huntington's article "Clash of Civilisations?"¹⁷ and later his book *Clash of Civilisations* attest to a gradual and constant strengthening of the Niebuhrian realism, which means the application of the thought that the original sin inherent in human nature makes the prospect of future conflicts more than probable. Instead of an unbroken optimism heralded by liberalism in a world which presents less and less problems and exemplified by Professor Fukuyama's views, that is, his 'endism', Huntington, in the footsteps of Niebuhr asserts with growing certainty that conflicts will arise as human nature inevitably produces them. As David R. Gress¹⁸ noticed, the appearance of the article and book "surprised many readers. One reason for that was the new and unusual note of "scepticism and pessimism they sensed from Huntington."¹⁹ Gress notes that after Huntington's previous book, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*²⁰ where he "argued that the theme of modern history was the irresistible spread of democratic habits and institutions,"²¹ the new article predicting ensuing conflicts between civilisations came as a surprise. Whereas the *Third Wave* ended optimistically, the new article and the book progressively deter from such an optimism. The gradual growth of pessimism can be detected by the disappearing question mark from the title of the book which turns a hypothetical suggestion, *Clash of Civilisations?* to a more assured statement implying that the occurrence of the clash is to be expected.

Fukuyama's proposition, the critique of which Huntington wrote in his *Clash*, is that with the disappearance of the communist superpower, which meant a constant threat to liberal democracies, the ongoing spread of the democratic systems will continue in an unbroken process and thus the possibility of oncoming wars is reduced to zero. No more basic conflicts will arise threatening the instauration of global peace. Professor Fukuyama's²² prognosis is being attacked from many sides. However, it represents the logical development and consequent application of the philosophical ideas of liberalism. To this, Huntington's answer was the *Clash*, and as a concise formulation of it, we may quote from his *Robust Nationalism: Conservatism* thus views conflict and even violent conflict as an inherent aspect of the human condition. "Real conflicts of interest exists among groups and

¹⁵ Huntington, S. P.: *The Lonely Superpower*. *Foreign Affairs* (1999) 78 2, pp. 35-49.

¹⁶ Niebuhr, R.: *The Irony of American History*. New York: Scribner (1952).

¹⁷ Huntington, S. P., *The Clash of Civilizations?* *Foreign Affairs*, (1993) 72 3, pp. 22-49

¹⁸ Gress, D. R.: *The Subtext of Huntington's "Clash"*. *Orbis*, Spring, (1997) pp. 285-298.

¹⁹ *ibid.* p. 287.

²⁰ Huntington, S. P.: *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late 20th Century*. Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press (1991).

²¹ *ibid.*

²² Fukuyama, F.: *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York, Free Press (1992).

societies,²³ and, as he adds in the *Clash*, among civilisations. Thus the *Clash* functions as the final reinvigoration of Nieburian Christian realism: by its warning of the inherent threat of global conflicts along the border lines of different civilisations, Nieburianism is applied to forecasting tendencies of global politics.

It is not by chance that the most ardent critiques of both the article and of the book, as David R. Gress puts it: “comes from optimists impermeable to the multiculturalist malaise and impressed by the overwhelming, triumphant, almost total Western dominance after the end of the Soviet Union.”²⁴ Just as Niebuhr’s opponents were the optimist idealists of the liberal side.

Finally, as a note of interest, even Huntington’s style reflects some of Niebuhrian effect when it reaches its artistic heights of concise and pictorial formulations. As a memorable image of American political science, he describes in his memorable work *The Soldier and the State*²⁵ the presence and the “ordered serenity” of the U. S. Military Academy at West Point as “a bit of Sparta in the midst of Babylon,”²⁶ merging two typically Niebuhrian symbolical notions of classical antiquity and the Bible.

CONCLUSION

In conclusions, Huntington quoted himself Niebuhr in some of his articles but only in very sparse words. However, Niebuhr’s influence is a determining factor in the formation of Huntington’s theory as well as practical policy in many, and in their most decisive aspects. Although there were important differences in their actual political positions, mainly in the case of the Vietnam war, the correspondences of their works are far more significant. Due to the limits of the present paper only some of these could be evoked, suggesting however, that there is ample room for work on a far greater scale which could uncover the full depth and significance of the fertility of Niebuhr’s political thought on America’s leading theorist of the ardent issues of global security.

²³ Huntington. *Robust*. p. 37.

²⁴ Gress: p. 288.

²⁵ Huntington, S. P.: *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations*. New York: Belknap Press (1957)

²⁶ *ibid.* pp. 464-465.

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