

Clash of civilizations and interregionalism: rise and fall (and a new dawn?) of two theoretical approaches

GIULIA MARIA GALLOTTA
Università degli Studi di Bari Aldo Moro

Abstract

The article starts from an analysis of S.P. Huntington's theory of the clash of civilizations and puts in evidence one of its critical points, i.e. the fact that Huntington does not pay any attention to the development by the EU of a particular kind of actorness through the promotion of interregionalism worldwide. Tracing the history of the different phases of success and decline of both theories, the article attempts to test their persistent explanatory and analytical capacity in relation to current developments in the international arena as well as in the academic context.

Keywords: civilization, clash, interregionalism, European Union, external relations.

1. In his famous essay, published in *Foreign policy* in summer 1993 and later expanded in his 1996 book, Samuel Huntington developed a theoretical framework for international relations in the post-cold war world which, starting from the realist paradigm of interstate competition for economic and military power, put forward a new and more radical cause of conflict, i.e. civilizations. These were defined as «the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes hu-

mans from other species» (Huntington 1993: 24). According to Huntington, a civilization is rooted in linguistic, cultural and historical affinities, in a sense of identification by individuals and, most of all, in a common set of religious beliefs and ethnic identities that, albeit changing over time, constitute the fundamental core of identity of large human aggregates, that transcend national borders. The fundamental character of traits that define individual civilization and the irreducibility of mutual differences, brought Huntington to say that «The most important conflicts of the future will occur along the cultural fault lines separating these civilizations from one another» (ivi: 25). The collapse of USSR and the end of the bipolar era had, in fact, opened new geo-political spaces for the affirmation of civilizations that differed from the western one, with the consequence that

the efforts of the West to promote its values of democracy and liberalism as universal values, to maintain its military predominance and to advance its economic interests engender countering responses from other civilizations (ivi: 29).

This in turn led to the emergence of an anarchic world where the West, and the USA in particular, should have to gear up and fight to keep their supremacy and both alliances and conflicts would have been the consequence of divergences between the original civilizations of the actors (which for Huntington were still represented by the States) involved. At the time Huntington put forward his theory, analyses of the possible configurations of post-cold war world went from the most irenic on the end of history (Fukuyama 1992) to those on the return to military confrontation among States in spite of all international organizations, that developed in the

fifty years of the bipolar conflict (Mearsheimer 1990: 5-56) to those that, on the contrary, put emphasis on the proactive role played by international and regional organizations in defining strategic preferences and options of States (Keohane, Nye and Hoffmann 1993). If one compares them to the clash of civilizations theory, the latter proposes a significant variable. In fact, it does not limit itself to tracing the scenario of future relations among States but, through the introduction of civilizations among the most plausible causes of conflict, gives the latter a radical and almost unchangeable character, a kind of struggle for survival and supremacy before the “court of history” à la Hegel. Moreover, even if he states that he does not mean to develop any predictive model for the evolution of international relations, by inserting the “civilizations” variable within a theoretical framework of clear realist inspiration, Huntington traces the scenario of both the nature of future conflicts and of the goals that the Western world, and the United States in particular, should have given themselves to maintain their position of supremacy.

Reactions to Huntington’s essay, just like to his 1996 book where he tried to give more consistency to his thesis, have been numerous and immediate. Some researchers, for example, pointed out that the very concept of civilization, outlined by Huntington, is not very structured with respect to others formulated in the Anglo-Saxon area, for example by Toynbee and Wallerstein, that are part of the cultural equipment of any scholar of that area and that Huntington deliberately leaves aside (Alker 1995: 533-562). Other scholars pointed out that the same notion of civilization, formulated by Huntington, is too vague and thus fails to

provide a scientifically valid and effective interpretation of the post-cold war world (Welch 1994: 197-216) or that it is too rigid to seriously take into account the internal diversity of each civilization, which would make his argument much more difficult to be backed up (Sen 1999: 3-17). However, others point out that his analysis focuses on a clash of civilizations that are ill-defined in their profiles and interests. For some, this leads to underestimate the real causes of creation of connections and conflicts among men, that can be summarized in the satisfaction of the basic human needs of identity, security, meaning and development (Rubinstein and Crocker 1994: 113-128). For others, this leads Huntington not to acknowledge the real clash, which is not represented by the one among civilizations, but by the clash among open and democratic societies and those which are not (Ikenberry 1997: 162-163).

From my analytical perspective, Huntington's clash of civilizations presents a deficiency. According to the realist approach of his theory, which considers states as the sole international actors, he does not see the process of development and consolidation of the European Union as an international actor alongside the former, that is going on in the same years when he publishes his book. Most of all, Huntington doesn't see the role of European practices in supporting the spread of regionalism in the world are gradually assuming both as a mitigating factor of the most harsh aspects of the clash of civilizations theory and as an important component in the definition of an EU-specific external identity.

In 1995, with the Barcellona declaration, EU starts off the Euro-mediterranean partnership, that is the proposal to the

countries belonging to the northern shore of the Mediterranean, with which it has long since signed preferential trade agreements, to create a free-trade area among themselves over a ten-year period, which will subsequently give birth to a Euro-mediterranean free-trade area. This goal is accompanied by political, social and cultural partnerships through which the EU aims to consolidate democracy and respect for human rights in partner states.¹ In December of the same year, an *EU-MERCOSUR Interregional Framework for Cooperation Agreement* is signed, that gives a more stable and comprehensive framework to the European Commission support both to the new customs union among the Cono Sur States and to individual bilateral agreements already signed with each Member State of the newly-formed association. EU's long term goal is to reach the conclusion of a free trade and political dialogue agreement between the two regional associations in a block-to-block negotiation process.² In March 1996, EU starts off the routine of ASEM biennial meetings, that is summit meetings between the European Commission and EU Member States, on the one side, and ASEAN Member States plus China, Japan and South Korea, on the other, to establish regular forms of dialogue on economic and political issues and on scientific and technologic development

1. Cfr. Barcelona declaration adopted at the Euro-Mediterranean, 27 e 28 novembre 1995 su <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM%3Ar15001>

2. Cfr. Council Decision 1996/205/EC of 20 November 1995 concerning the provisional application of certain provisions of the Interregional Framework Cooperation Agreement between the European Community and its Member States, of the one part, and the Southern Common Market and its Party States, of the other part in OJ L 69 of 19 March 1996: 1-22.

and cooperation. The ultimate goal of the ASEM talks is to reach the conclusion of a trade cooperation agreement between EU and ASEAN, here too through block-to-block negotiations. With regard to EU support to the regional integration process among the African, Caribbean and Pacific States (ACP), a cooperation with which dates back to the 1963 Yaoundè Convention, this is part of the fourth Lomé Convention, signed in 1989. It must be noted, anyway, that already since 1974 the Council of Ministers had declared EEC willingness to respond positively to requests for support made by developing countries committed in regional integration processes.³

This is the development of what M. Telò calls interregionalism, that is the development of «real formalized agreements and the negotiation processes that prepare these bi-regional agreements» (Telò 2004: 110; the author's translation), forms of interaction and cooperation among distinct regions (Söderbaum and Van Langenhove 2005: 249-262). Above all, beyond all definitions, it is a targeted action through which the EU aims to support the spread of regional cooperation in the world. The objective of this action is not explicitly political. Better say, it is not immediate. The 1995 *European Commission Communication on EU support for economic integration efforts among developing countries* stresses that, by virtue of the unique character of its experience, the EU is a «natural supporter of regional initiatives... its success as a regional grouping has... fuelled demands by developing

3. Cfr. Conseil des Ministres, *Résolution sur l'intégration régionale entre pays en voie de développement*, all. VII, Releve des décisions prises par le Conseil lors de sa 284ème session à Luxembourg le 30 avril 1974, T/230/74 (GCD).

countries for political and financial support for these regional initiatives» (Commission of the European Communities 1995: 6). Hence, it seems that EU's action can be considered more as an answer to specific requests made by its partners rather than as an action explicitly aimed at exporting its own integration model. And yet, by contributing to the political stabilization and economic development of poor areas in the world, by pushing neighboring countries to strengthen their identity as a group and their shared perception of their common interests, the EU actually pursues broad strategic interests, that can be reconciled to a variable extent with those of the partner States involved. Striking examples in this regard are the Barcellona declaration and the EU-MERCOSUR dialogue: in both cases, the EU aims to develop broad and structured relations that allow it to fit into situations in which a strong role is traditionally played by the USA through a discrete role in leading local regional cooperation processes. As far as the Euro-mediterranean dialogue is concerned, this is joined by the attempt to propose the European experience of economic integration, which allowed Europe to overcome historical rivalries among its Member States, as a possible solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This is what Telò calls the civilian power action of the European Union, that is EU's ability to influence the strategic options and choices of partners with whom it relates through the spreading of processes of regionalism across the world and the maintenance of its own peculiar model of competitive social market economy in the globalized world (Telò 2004).⁴

4. Cfr. It is worth noting that Telò is the only one that builds the European civilian power concept - not only around the economic and commercial weight of the European Union but also around a precise dimension

In this sense, support and promotion of regionalism attract scholars of EU's external relations. Hettne e Söderbaum see it as the instrument through which the EU tries and diffuse in the world a system of governance which is modeled on its own experience of stabilizing relations among former enemy States. In this action, EU's policies oscillate between those of a civilian power and those of a «soft imperialism», that is «an asymmetric form of dialogue or even the imposition or strategic use of norms and conditionalities enforced for reasons of self-interest» (Hettne and Söderbaum 2004: 5), according to the institutional stability of its partners which influence the EU's ability to impose its preferences on them or to have to obtain their voluntary adhesion. In 2009, Börzel and Risse stress that, in line with the mainstream analysis of the EU's foreign policy, the promotion of regional integration in the world constitute an important dimension of its external identity since through this the EU does not limit itself to proposing itself as an exporter of normative standards, as far as respects for human rights and protection of democracy are concerned. Promotion of regionalism is also the best way

of its external relations. T. Padoa Schioppa, who in 2001, introduces the concept of Europe as a gentle power does not analyze EU's external relations. The approach by Manners is different. In 2002, in defining the EU as a “normative power”, he emphasizes values of peace, democracy, respect for human rights which constitute the foundations of the EU integration process and which the EU tries to support and enhance worldwide. From this analytical angle, «institutionalization of a relationship between the EU and a third party, such as an inter-regional co-operation agreement, membership of an international organization or enlargement of the EU itself» are mere instruments, albeit not further developed, through which the EU procedurally affirms its normative action. Cfr. Manners 2002: 244.

to «ensure (regional) security, stability and prosperity at the EU's border and beyond» (Börzel and Risse 2009: 5). In this sense, in the 2004 brochure “*Un acteur mondial*”, the European Commission reformulated the 1995 Communication arguments in a more strategic attitude:

l'Union coopère avec d'autres pays et organisations internationales pour que chacun puisse recueillir les fruits de l'ouverture des marchés, de la croissance économique et de la stabilité, dans un monde de plus en plus interdépendent [tout en préservant] ses [de l'Union] intérêts économiques et commerciaux légitimes dans l'arène internationale (Commission européenne 2004: 3).

Hence, the EU external action is explicitly devised as the result of a careful balance between the interest in the economic and political development of actors with whom it relates, whether they are States or regional organizations, and the safeguard of the Union's strategic interests and priorities.

In this action, interregionalism plays a peculiar role, as the largest part of the analyses on the topic emphasize. Interregionalism displays a precise strategic character, that allows the EU not only to promote its own model of regional integration and to affirm itself as the most advanced and successful process of regional integration in the world. Through the promotion of regionalism, the EU tries to develop an external projection that, by leveraging the attractiveness of its own economic model and the commercial and civilian tools that characterize first of all the forms of its own organization, allows it to establish itself on the international scene, beyond the *expectation-capability gap* (Hill 1993: 305-328), that marks its more ambitious CFSP. At the same time, by promoting the development of relations with other areas in the world and by encouraging the formation and the consolidation of

regional cooperation, the promotion of the latter allows the EU to have a definite and alternative identity to the USA, to propose its own experience in the overcoming of conflicts through economic cooperation, diluting the turmoil of clashes, not only of civilizations, through institutional frameworks of routinized cooperation, and to contribute to the development of a system of world governance based on shared rules and values, the only one in which the EU can establish itself as a new kind of power (Söderbaum, Stalgren and Van Langenhove 2005: 365-380; Farrell 2009: 1165-1184).

2. It is worth noting that the period of greater attention, paid by scholars to EU promotion of regionalism worldwide, occurs simultaneously with that in which Huntington's theory of the clash of civilizations experiences a substantial crisis. Relunched by Huntington and his supporters as a theoretical key for analyzing the attack on the Twin Towers on September 11th 2001 and used by President G.W. Bush to support US wars in Afghanistan and in Iraq, this was again the object of harsh criticism. Some have stressed its essential American-centered nature, which leads both to simplify the complex relationship between Islamic world and the West world and not to place in the right analytical framework the relations between the USA and the States that have been attacked (Erdem 2002: 81-107; Abrahamian 2003: 529-544). Others have pointed out that resorting to the clash of civilizations theory does not only imply a justification of a wrong war to Islam as a whole but serves above all to distract public opinion from restrictions to individual liberties, adopted by the Bush administration in the name of a war to terrorism,

particularly against Muslims. Still others have showed that Huntington's theory is not supported by any kind of quantitative data (Fox 2005: 428-457) and that an oversimplified definition of civilization leads to put aside the rich historical and cultural exchanges and relations between the western and Islamic worlds (Said 2001). The renewed attention to Huntington's clash of civilizations appears as essentially instrumental with respect to both the urgency of explaining the terrorist attack of September 11th and, as far as criticisms that have been addressed are concerned, by the will to oppose simplified explanations in support of US wars. It is not therefore a question of a real deepening of Huntington's theoretical analysis, which on the contrary is brutally simplified. In fact, the clash of civilizations theory seems to fall in the category of theories to be remembered from time to time, above all in order to argue about how unfounded they were (Casanova 2011: 252-267; Quinn 2017).⁵ However, even the scientific attention to the European Union's promotion of regionalism in the world seems to have diminished, especially in the 2009-2010 period. Undoubtedly, the outbreak

5. More precisely, it is worth noting that the concept of civilization has had a certain fortune in academic research, though not in the same sense as that used by Huntington, most notably after the terrorist attack in 11/09. Particularly in the field of international relations, various theoretical approaches take different notions of civilizations, intended as monolithic entities or as more complex historical constructions or as instruments of political practices of domination, as starting points to stem frameworks of analysis of the international scenario in terms that go from possible conflict to dialogue. For an interesting survey on the question see Bettiza 2013. *The Social and Material Construction of Civilizations in International Relations: the 'Muslim World' in American Foreign Policy after 9/11*, EUI Working Paper MWP, 2013/26.

of the international financial crisis and then of the Greek crisis catalyze the attention of scholars and researchers. The EU faces one of the most serious crises in its history with an initial uncertainty and this drains resources and concern. Most of all, this brings European institutions to concentrate on immediate solutions to the crisis, thus leaving aside the negotiations on far-reaching regional agreements. Moreover, the way in which the Greek crisis is managed has the effect of bringing EU Member States and their national interests to the center of EU decision-making processes (Fabbrini 2017; Habermas 2012). Once that the “genius” of national interests has taken center stage with regard to the management of the single currency, it is however extremely difficult, if not impossible, to push it back with regard to developments of other EU policies. This helps explaining, for example, the substantial block of negotiations for an EU-MERCOSUR agreement: the process of progressive liberalization of trade, which the agreement should regulate, should also involve agricultural products in order to respond to the interests of Latin American producers but it would entail the parallel reduction in protections enjoined by EU farmers (Malamud and Schmitter 2007). This is an option that is rejected by national governments that often depend on the farmers’ vote for their re-election. Moreover, the newly found centrality of EU Member States hinders EU coherence and cohesion in defining the objectives and instruments of EU’s action but these are however necessary for the European Union to develop an effective action on the international scene (Smith 2013: 653-671). Still States interests, but this time those of the EU partners, explain the difficulties of EU-ASEAN ne-

gotiations, with the Member States of the latter that resist any EU attempt to promote more structured relations as well as a greater institutionalization of ASEAN itself (Robles 2008: 541-560). More recently, the emergence of China on the international scene and the election of D. Trump to the US presidency have and continue to dig furrows in the multilateral framework in which EU interregionalism has developed, bringing back to the heart of international relations a confrontation of variable harshness between powers and thus reducing room for mediation and regulation of world governance that interregionalism opened and unfolded.

Even more relevant, in my opinion, is that in the *Global strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security policy*, presented in June 2016, interregionalism does not appear to be a relevant instrument among those available to the EU for managing its external relations. This is no longer considered as the main channel for disseminating the European model of regional integration in the world nor is it referred to as the privileged tool for supporting the resolution of conflicts among bordering States and for encouraging economic development of EU partners. Moreover, the EU declares that it will have recourse to interregionalism from its "specific goals" and from those of its Member States. In the larger context of what the *Global Strategy* indicates as the objectives of EU's external action, a constant attention is paid to new challenges, like migrations, terrorism, cyber-security and questions linked to environmental depletion, which are referred to as priority areas of cooperation. Compared to these, interregionalism is an objective in itself through which the EU aims «to spur shared global responsibilities» (Euro-

pean External Action Service 2016: 32), which is a rather undefined formula. Adding to the concerns is the indication of actors with whom the EU intends to develop different forms of cooperation: here we find both regional organizations with which the EU has long developed a dense network of relations like MERCOSUR, ASEAN and the ACP group of States and multilateral organizations like the UN and the various economic and financial international organizations and single States that are of particular strategic importance like the USA, Canada, Russia, China and Japan. With respect to each of them, emphasis is on EU strategic interest in balanced partnerships and in the development of a multilateral framework of shared rules, starting from the protection of European interests and positions, first and foremost the support for EU strategies of economic recovery and employment. We find here an example of what G. Finizio calls the

relative relinquishment of the promotion of a deep and multidimensional regionalism, in favour of more immediate and selfish interests... and therefore the reduction of its ambition – at least for the time being – to the post-westphalian transformation of the international system (The author's translation. Finizio 2015: 150-151).

However, these are empirical developments, changes in the international scenario and in the relations among its actors. Analysis that of these are made, are numerous but fail to compose in a coherent analysis of the growing difficulties of European interregionalism. There seems to be a lack of broader analyses that deepen a shared research field. How can this academic withdrawal be explained? Undoubtedly, theories too are subject to research trends and interregionalism is no exception. Success of the conceptual-

ization by Telò of the European Union as a civilian power has benefited from and, at the same time, made it possible to deepen a specific research field on the evolution of EU interregional relations. Compared to which, however, analysis of EU individual relationships of this kind was functional to deepen a broader conceptualization, i.e. the new kind of international power the EU represented and of the peculiar nature of its external action.

On the other hand, the attempt to develop academic researches on interregionalism that made the latter a kind of autonomous concept, a distinct category of international relations, proved to be more difficult. This not only a consequence of the fact that the notion of interregionalism is in itself difficult to circumscribe, beyond the broad formulas reported at the beginning, as noted by many scholars (Söderbaum and Van Langenhove 2005; Hänggi, Roloff and Rüländ: 2006). I think there is a more specific difficulty concerning the analysis on interregionalism, which is linked to the fact that the latter is a purely European Union practice. Two essays seem to me particularly illustrative in this sense. The first is published by A. Hardacre and M. Smith in 2014. The two researchers develop the concept of complex interregionalism to define the European Union practice to combine the traditional promotion of interregional relationships with bilateral or transregional relationships⁶ on the basis both of the strategic importance attributed to the EU presence in the area concerned and of the different degrees of resistance, opposed by State partners to EU's conditionalities in terms of commer-

6. Starting from Hänggi, those relationships are so defined that include not only regional organizations but also «a diffuse membership of States from a variety of regions». Cfr. Doidge 2016: 3.

cial openness and respect of democratic and environmental standards for the development of preferential trade agreements. The attempt at conceptualization carried out is admittedly limited: the two researchers develop their analysis starting from concrete EU policies and they forge a notion that is referred to this latter, without any attempt at verifying the possibility of extending its scope of application to other experiences of regionalism in the world (Hardacre and Smith 2014: 91-106). The book published by M. Doidge in 2016 is more ambitious, in this respect. He tries to develop a definition of interregionalism which, abstracting from European Union action, can be strong and broad enough to include all forms of interregional relations in the world, including those of the EU. His definition draws on B. Hettne and defines interregionalism as «institutionalized relationships between groups of states from different regions, each coordinating to a greater or lesser degree» (Doidge 2016: 2). Starting from this, Doidge builds up the stages of an evolution of the spread of interregionalism in the world, the characteristics that regional actors need to develop in order to be able to propose themselves as participants of interregional policies and that are identified in terms of «identity, presence and actorness» (ivi: 20). The point is that Doidge's analysis always ends up returning to the European Union as the most solidly institutionalized actor, endowed with stronger identity and more actorness in interregional relations and therefore a paradigmatic example when it comes to interregionalism, as if to say that the object of analysis revealed itself as the starting point or at least the term of reference of each analytical category on which the analysis itself is based.

This takes us back to a fundamental problem of research on interregionalism. The latter is a EU's specific practice, that presupposes adequate institutional structures, an economic and political model capable of exerting attraction on partners and appropriate diplomatic techniques in the management of negotiations, i.e. elements that are all well developed in the EU but are not in other regional organizations in the world, despite endeavors in this direction in both Latin America and Asia. An essay by J. Rüländ in 2014 is interesting in this sense. Here, Rüländ admits that the Eurocentric nature of research on interregionalism is the main limit with which those who dedicate themselves to this type of research must confront. On the other hand, he proposes a new start for it in the perspective of a categorization of interregionalism as a tool for the diffusion of institutionalized rules among the actors involved (Rüländ 2014). An issue which is still left to address is whether this represents the opening of a new research field or it will remain a mere exhortation.

3. Huntington's theory of the clash of civilizations has aroused a great deal of attention and harsh criticisms as to its capacity to serve as an analytical lens to capture the peculiarities of the contemporary international scenario and, in its simplified version, has been reduced to a noble justification for conflicts of various kind between the USA and other States, albeit maintaining a certain vitality, as shown by the recurrent criticism addressed to it. On the other hand, theories on interregionalism have essentially endured changes in the international framework, in which interregionalism

developed, and the aporias in their formulation, as highlighted by Rüländ in his 2014 essay. However, unlike the clash of civilizations, theories on interregionalism can still be very productive, and not only because after years of negotiations EU and MERCOSUR have recently signed an agreement for the creation of their own free trade area or because interregionalism continues to be a practicable alternative to dynamics of rude confrontation among States, carried out precisely by those States that consider the EU as an obstacle to their bilateralism (Coralluzzo 2017: 9-14). Theories on interregionalism give consistence to those on the new kind of power the EU represents in international relations, a status that does not seem to be destined to change in the near future due to resistance to rearmament policies by EU Member States and European civil societies. The theoretical deepening of the peculiarities of the EU external relations and of the role of interregionalism in it still remains an important dimension of any research on EU external relations within an increasingly complex scenario (Missiroli 2015). In this direction, it seems to me that an interesting starting point, which in a certain sense assumes Rüländ's objection to the Eurocentric nature of research on interregionalism, can be traced in new researches that takes as their starting assumption the fact that, most notably after the Greek crisis of 2009-2013, the European Union is not the model that inspires other forms of regionalism in the world. Rather it can be seen as «a telling laboratory of regionally embedded multilateral practices and values» (Telò, Fawcett and Ponjaerts 2015: 1-14) to which other regional experience can look in an appropriation process of EU practices which lead in turn

to the development of autochthonous forms of integration (Acharya 2016: 109-131). It can be considered a new beginning for research on interregionalism. And any beginning, you know, is always dark.

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