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Culture and Politics: 
The Challenge of the New ‘Identity Politics’

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By Bjørn Thomassen, Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations, The American University of Rome.

Content: 1- Introduction; 2 – Understanding Identity Politics; 3 – From Interest Politics to Identity Politics?; 4 – Culture, Identity and IR theory; 5 - Political conflict as cultural conflict: Samuel Huntington and IR theory; 6 - How does culture influence political or social behaviour?; 7 – Conclusion: the role of culture in Conflict Resolution..

1. Introduction.

This article is about culture and how to deal with it. It is an attempt to set some limits, draw some boundaries, and indicate some warning signs. It is also about the quality of those boundaries that ‘cultures’ are made from. I will focus on the analytical challenge that ‘identity politics’ represents to political theory in general and International Relations theory in particular. The analytical challenge is this: how to describe and ‘capture’ political movements that use culture as their point of departure? The theoretical challenge is this: how to understand and explain these movements? The challenge can be pinned down to one single question: what is the role of culture in political movements and in the creation of political conflict? I am not going to propose any final answers to this question. What I do wish is to point out some of the many pitfalls to avoid as we seek to meet the challenge. This article, therefore, is modestly about how to ask the right kind of questions. My argument will be of a theoretical, suggestive nature, using empirical examples mostly to illustrate the points raised. At the end of the paper, I will tentatively try and point to an applied dimension of the discussion, relating to conflict and conflict resolution: if conflicts contain a cultural element, how can this element enter negotiations of conflict? If we claim that cultural factors are behind the eruption of conflict, then those factors must be built into our models of conflict resolution – and this is not as simple as it sounds.

2. Understanding Identity Politics

I would like to start the argument with an anecdote. During the 1990s, Denmark set up a couple of centres for Bosnian refugees. In one of the centres, a Bosnian boy would every night go out and piss on the floor in the corridor. The personnel working in the centre did not know what to do about it, so they called an anthropologist who knew about Eastern European culture to deal with the problem. This was an American anthropologist, one of my then professors, who later wrote an article about this episode, with the eloquent title: “Why Bosnians Kids Piss on the Floor”\(^1\). Evidently the title was ironic: as if there is something about Bosnian culture which makes people do that. The anthropologist of course told the people working in the centre: this is not about culture. He had done fieldwork in the Balkans, and there kids don’t piss on the floor. The reaction may be caused by stress symptoms, traumas, or simply the sudden loss of a taken-for-granted home environment. The reaction is something any human being could produce in the given circumstances. It might be related to family problems, which are often exacerbated when families are forced to live together in

single rooms, or it might be about communication problems. But it is certainly not part of Bosnian culture to piss on the floor.

What is of course interesting about this anecdote is the very fact that the people in the centre actually called an anthropologist when a refugee kid started to piss on the floor: it means that they identify the problem as having to do with culture. And if culture is everywhere, so is anthropology, hot at its heels. However, as this story shows, more often as a watchdog than as a service provider. The refugee centre called for an anthropologist to “clear up the cultural misunderstanding”, indicating further how they conceptualised the issue as relating to a cultural misunderstanding in the encounter between ‘Danish’ and ‘Bosnian’ culture. The anthropologist insisted that this was not a problem caused by a clash of cultures either. In the short article written on this episode, my professor further argued that it was society itself that had become ideologically culturalised. And this is both the context for and part of the problem of what I would like to discuss in this paper: the use of culture to understand and explain the world in which we live.

The need for cultural explanations is not confined to this episode from social life in a Danish refugee centre. The request has spread to academia, and to popular discourse, and the request is of course not taken out of the blue. From the 1980s we have talked about the ‘cultural turn’ in the social sciences, a development that influenced political theory and later also IR theory. This ‘cultural turn’ implied an actor-oriented point of view, as it implied a stress on meaning and interpretation. In the title to this paper I allude to the challenge of the new ‘Identity Politics’. We have in the recent years, roughly over the last 15-20 years, witnessed the growth of political movements which seek to strengthen the collective sense of uniqueness. These movements either build on prior communities, most often religious or ethnic, and strengthen the bonds between people belonging to these communities, or they construct wholly new types of collectivities via a political process. Whether we are dealing with ethnicity, national identity, religion or any other type of local or particular identity, the common trait is that ‘culture’ and cultural factors are becoming more and more important for the articulation of personal and collective interest, for the articulation of social movements, and for the establishment of legitimacy in politics. Very critically, cultural factors and cultural differences are also influencing, and according to some even causing, the escalation of political conflict, locally and globally.

The phenomenon has taken on different names as it imploded in the various disciplines: in social movements theory we talk about it as the New Social Movements (NSMs), where the ‘new’ refers to a shift from interest to identity politics. The ‘old’ social movements were instead characterised by interest conflicts, and the class movements of the 19th and 20th centuries were the classical examples. The NSMs focus more closely on patterns of representation than on redistribution of income. In political philosophy we talk about a new ‘politics of difference’, related to the growing citizenship literature where the notion of ‘differentiated citizenship’ has been introduced in order to represent the view that even citizens of same states have cultural identities that need institutional recognition. In anthropology and political science the most commonly used term for the general trend I am

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indicating is that of Identity Politics (abbreviated as IP from now onwards). In IR theory, a new paradigm called ‘culturalism’ is developing in order to match the challenge posed by culturally defined conflict, and Samuel Huntington is probably the most famous spokesperson of this ‘school’. In the following I will broadly refer to IP as the kind of politics where political claims are made on the basis of some kind of cultural identity, rather than on the basis of political ideology or class belonging (please refer to model below). In short, it is the use of culture for political purposes. Politics since the 1980s has to a large extent meant identity politics.

As happened with the studies of nationalism that exploded in the 1980s, the new mixtures of cultural and political phenomena have brought together different branches of the social, political and human sciences. Potentially this is very fruitful. Still, the question is whether this interdisciplinary dialogue has functioned, and whether the notion of culture has been digested well. I recognize two extremeties in the current debate: one consists in stretching the concept too far, imbuing ‘culture’ with promises and explanatory powers it cannot deliver, as happened in the Danish refugee centre. The other consists in stubbornly resisting the relevance of ‘soft’ concepts like culture and identity as we analyse politics. Considering the overexposition of the culture concept, it is in fact not surprising that quite a few social and political theorists have turned against concepts like ‘culture’ and ‘identity’. While doing my PhD at a Department of Political Science, I remember a workshop involving a series of prominent IR scholars and political scientists, gathered to discuss a newly established research project on “European Identity”, which had already been financed by the EU. We spent 3 hours trying to define ‘identity’, and waited with dread for ‘culture’ which was next on the list. The discussion was getting nowhere. I argued for a phenomenological approach, and proposed that the concepts were left undefined, as social actors themselves imbue them with meaning. That was flatly rejected, as it worked against the attempt to establish a coherent comparative framework that could facilitate the data-gathering process. At a certain point lunch was ready, and a fellow PhD researcher raised his hand and said: “Why don’t we just return to good old Rational Choice?”. Most of the audience knocked their table in approval, and with an almost secret smile of relief on their faces. Many of them were not back in the workshop after lunch.

We thus find a quite hard opposition in political science between cultural explanatory frameworks and other theoretical frameworks that insist to focus on more materialistic factors in the explanation of human behavior – which is of course a rehearsal of an old dualism between materialistic and idealistic explanatory frameworks. In IR theory the old opposition between Realists and Liberalists, arguing over whether or not ideas could cause action, is now being supplemented by a new challenge from social constructivists, and whereas Liberalists always insisted on the importance of ideas and ideologies, social constructivists make a much more radical claim: international politics is also driven by social and cultural constructions of the world in which we live. Many IR theorists have taken a very negative view of this new type of theory, and fail to see its relevance for what they are doing. However, the total rejection of the role of culture and identity is certainly not a solution either: any kind of political theory today must somehow be able to cope with the fact that cultural values, and cultural identity, in its many forms, are part of the political realities in which we live.

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The proliferation of IP is in itself neither good or bad, and my aim is certainly not to make a normative assessment of the phenomena we can witness. The politics of Difference and Diversity was part of the postmodernist turn, which again one may either hate or love. Interestingly, one can choose to see the stress on Difference either as a threat to classical Liberalism (where people’s cultural particularities were private matters, not meant to dominate public discourse) or as a long-wanted freedom from the oppressive identification models offered by the homogenising (and ultimately non-Liberal) modern nation-state. From the political Left, IP can either be deplored as ‘false consciousness’, or celebrated as a new emancipatory tool in a reconfigured political debate. Most of Feminism, also as it challenged mainstream IR theory, involved exactly an attack on (male-oriented) models of representation that had sifted into even our theoretical models of state, society and war. At the empirical level, when we say identity politics we think of ethnic wars in Yugoslavia, religious nationalism in India, Islamic fundamentalism, the Northern League in Italy, new nationalistic parties in Europe, and other tendencies that most scholars as well as ordinary people classify as both bad and dangerous. But by IP we certainly also imply new forms of multiculturalism, minority rights, freedom to be who you are (also in the sexual sense), a new stress on the cultural dimension of Human Rights, historical recognition of cultural oppression - and these phenomena are normally considered good, and very politically correct. IP has also meant a constructive reconfiguration of what we mean by politics in the first place, involving a whole series of personal and often very moral issues, that formerly were seen as pre-political. This erosion of the boundary between the political and the non-political – which is also a challenge to the boundary between private and public – can be seen as a threat to the very possibility of politics. In a famous definition, politics in the postmodern world is no longer about the allocation of resources, but about the allocation of values – with the endless moralising this can lead to. Nonetheless, value-driven discussions are not necessarily bad or wrong. And the classical understanding of politics as that public discussion we choose to partake in once we leave our household may indeed be questioned.

3. From Interest Politics to Identity Politics?

Model 1: Interest politics versus Identity politics & ‘Old’ Social Movements versus New Social Movements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interest politics</th>
<th>Identity politics (IP)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Politics of redistribution</td>
<td>Politics of recognition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics as a competition over scarce resources and power</td>
<td>Politics as a struggle over people’s moral and symbolic imaginations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political movements are based on political ideologies, which are most often tied to class, and place themselves in reference to a Left/Right divide</td>
<td>Political movements are based on cultural particularity (ethnicity, religion, gender, region) and are not easily understood with a classical Left/right divide</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‘Old’ Social Movements  
Focus on socio-economic structures and/or

New Social Movements  
Focus on cultural injustices, rooted in

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structures of political domination | social patterns of representation and communication
---|---
Targets of public policies are classes or class-like collectivities defined through their relation to the market or the means of production | Targets are ‘status groups’ defined by relations of recognition in which they enjoy lesser esteem than other groups, or are not even recognised as groups
Remedy: Economic restructuring, change of income distribution, change of division of labour | Remedy: Cultural and symbolic change to upwardly revalue disrespected identities, enhancing rights to a diversity of groups

The above model summarises the main differences between interest politics and identity politics, and how they tend to create different kinds of social movements and political claims based on these. The first question to pose is this: has identity politics really replaced interest politics?

Classical political theory as it developed in the postwar period for the most part saw politics as a strategic struggle to affirm one’s own interest, where the political actor was most often conceived as individuals or states, or some other definable ‘closed’ units (corporations, Unions, etc.). Some authors did recognise that ideological factors could influence political action, beyond this more narrow definition of interest politics. Still, up until the late 1970s concepts like culture and identity were rarely used by political scientists. Culture belonged to anthropology, and identity belonged to psychology.

To the extent that post-war political theory dealt with issues of ‘culture’ it did so mostly by talking about ‘ideology’. A famous reconsideration of ideology in explanatory frameworks was made by Theda Skocpol. In her comparative work on revolutions, “States and Social Revolutions” Skocpol initially took a structuralist position, arguing that social-revolutionary conflicts primarily involved class-driven struggles over the forms of state structures. “States and Social Revolutions” is rightly considered part of the paradigm shift within political science that signalled a new emphasis on state autonomy in relationship to underlying socioeconomic processes. However, Skocpol was subsequently criticised for not given due weight to ideology, which she largely had considered derivative from more tangible material interests. The run of events that led to the Iranian revolution in 1979 seemed to confirm that criticism, and in her later analysis of the Iranian revolution, Skocpol granted quite extensive powers to ideology and ideas, as she suddenly argued that ‘the Shiite ideology of martyrdom’ had inspired many Iranians to oppose the Shah. Skocpol indeed made a U-turn, and declared that ideology in some cases could function like an independent variable.

This move would become quite popular during the 1980s, where interpretative approaches won terrain. However, this implementation of the ‘cultural stuff’ in political theory had its own limitations: before it was nothing, now it had suddenly become an independent variable, a kind of cause which could be isolated as an autonomous force. Yet this U-turn was indeed indicative of a positivist science trying to incorporate non-positivist concepts. By declaring ideology an independent variable, the variable could, albeit some difficulties, be contained.

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7 Theda Skocpol, States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1979.
within classical and positivist political theory. In fact, thinking it through, the turn was less of a U-turn: it was more like a turning upside-down the causal relationship.

It should be clear, however, that analysing identity politics means something very different from simply including ‘ideology’ as a causal factor. More likely, it deals with the way in which we in different contexts imagine cultural and political collectivities, and not necessarily the explicit ideologies with which we do so. Cultural identity is much less easy to contain in positivistic models, with strong notions of causality. It is ultimately futile to even try and contain ‘culture’ in such models, I would argue. What needs to be done, rather, is to build theoretical models that allow for multi-causality, and to look for interconnections between a variety of factors rather than singling out separate causes. This, however, implies to leave behind the very notion of ‘independent variables’, and many political scientists hesitate to make this step.

The sharp division between interest and identity politics is rather artificial from the outset. Already to Max Weber, the idea of politics centered upon power relations and calculable interests was reductive. Weber’s definition of the political community was very explicit here:

“As a separate structure, a political community can be said to exist if, and insofar as, a community constitutes more than an ‘economic group’; or, in other words, in so far as it possesses value systems ordering matters other than the directly economic disposition of goods and services”.

Weber made this observation in his attempt to uncover one of his central questions, namely that of political legitimacy. Weber famously distinguished between three main forms of legitimacy, namely traditional, charismatic and bureaucratic. Yet Weber’s point about the value-underpinning of political communities was made for all types of political communities. Following Weber, politics certainly involves a competition over resources and power, but it also involves a struggle over meanings and symbols – and as a consequence, a struggle over the institutions that define and articulate social values. Politics functions like a Leviathan, but it also functions as a symbol maker. Politics has never been just a struggle over interest: it is likewise a symbolic struggle over people’s imaginations and the world-views from which interests are defined in the first place. This notion of politics as a struggle over people’s imaginations is an important corrective to mainstream political theory as it developed in the postwar period. But it should not function as a replacement: when so, it allows itself to easy deconstruction and dismissal by political realists as ‘thin air’.

Relating to contemporary politics, it seems very clear that we cannot understand political conflict in the Middle East and North Africa if we do not take seriously the role of politics as symbol maker. What is happening, with particular salience in all North African states, is a struggle over the use of religious symbols and meanings, and the role these should have in the public sphere. But the point is by no means related to the MENA region only. In analysing Catalan nationalism and how it developed from the latter part of the 19th century, I made a

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10 Weber has often been misinterpreted as saying that the ‘cultural’ dimension was most present in traditional legitimacy, and would diminish with rational bureaucracy. However, modern bureaucracies, according to Weber, were most severely penetrated by a certain historically and culturally produced ethos, linked to a *beruf* mentality that was religious in origin.
similar claim, in trying to combine cultural and political theory\textsuperscript{11}. The explanatory models offered by political scientists on the emergence of ethno-nationalism in Europe – regions fighting against the (nation) state in which they are placed - all argued that somehow these groups (Catalans, Basques, Corsicans, Welsh etc.) suffered from deprivation. Once it was realised that some of these regions were pretty well off, the explanation stressed that regions would seek independence due to either economic under- or over- development. Seeking independence is simply a rational choice in certain situations where one’s region suffers economically from state policies. The key concept, which was also used by Ernest Gellner in his early studies of nationalism and its diffusion\textsuperscript{12}, is that of Uneven Development.

However, this clearly cannot explain why such movements happen to take place in areas where there is also a broadly sustained historical narrative of cultural identity not in line with official state-nationalism: or why it does not happen everywhere a certain region has more or less (the level of significance to be defined) resources than the average of the state in which they live. Uneven development seems to be a necessary but not sufficient cause. Based on fieldwork in Catalonia, I argued that one simply cannot understand the remarkable success of Catalan nationalism without considering the way in which cultural factors play a role, enter politics, and in this process themselves becoming shaped by that political struggle. Catalan nationalism is certainly a struggle over resources which are both economic and political, but it is equally a struggle over symbolic resources and symbolic interpretations of history, language and identity. Nor should those cultural variables be isolated in the explanation: the Catalan self-perception, so strongly manifest still today, of being entrepreneurial, compromise-seeking, rational and hard-working, as opposed to the ‘rest of Spain’, developed with the industrial revolution that took place in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. The fact remains, however, that it is Catalan identity that has mobilised people against the Spanish state, and to reduce the identity factor to an epiphenomenon is simply not good political science.

Hence, while recognizing its importance, one should similarly hesitate to single out ‘culture’ or ‘ideology’ as cause. To return to Skocpol’s example: The Iranian Revolution was also about how (‘traditional’) ideology steered and determined a political process, or how a cultural-religious identity caused the overthrow of the Shah: to not see this dimension would be a serious flow. As Michel Foucault observed, the struggle in Iran was an almost archetypical struggle between a Saint armed with nothing but the mobilising force of his ideas and a King holding on to his reign, equipped with one of the world’s most best-armed regimes, yet helplessly seeing his legitimacy erode\textsuperscript{13}. But to understand the Iranian revolution, it would would be equally non-sense to leave aside ‘material’ factors, such as the socio-economic development of Iran in the decades prior to 1979, economic inflation, a burgoning


\textsuperscript{13} After several visits to Iran, and a series of newspaper articles published front page by Il Corriere della Sera, Michel Foucault expressed his views on Iran in French in October 1978 in an article entitled “Of What Are the Iranians Dreaming?” in \textit{Nouvel Observateur}, where he wrote: “The situation in Iran seems to depend on a great joust under traditional emblems, those of the king and the saint, the armed sovereign and the destitute exile, the despot faced with the man who stands up bare-handed and is acclaimed by a people.” Foucault was well aware that religion was more than ‘ideology’, and polemically argued that Iranians were looking for a new type of ‘political spirituality’. A recent English version of “Of What Are the Iranians Dreaming?” is available on-line at http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/007863.html (downloaded on June 3, 2007; excerpt from \textit{Foucault and the Iranian Revolution}, by Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, Chicago University Press, 2005).
‘class’ conflict between elites and commoners, between city and countryside, the corruption and clientelism that stretched from within the state apparatus out toward chosen and favoured economic entrepreneurs, and, of course, the role played by international relations, including the role of US foreign policy.

In short, the opposition between identity politics and interest-based politics is ultimately a false one, created by the seemingly tireless tendency in Western thinking to stress either the level of ideas or the level of the physical world. This means that we should hesitate to simply revert our analytical models, and construct a history that walks upside down.

4. Culture, Identity and IR Theory

The culture concept only really entered IR from the 1990s, and hesitantly so. In 1990 a book appeared with the title, “Culture and International Relations”, although with little immediate effect. However, ‘culture’ was on the agenda, and more publications followed. The culture debate established itself as a part of the critique of established disciplinary discourses coming mostly from social constructivist approaches. The culture debate was taken in different directions, as ‘culture’ can be invoked to influence IR concerns at various levels: ‘culture’ can influence policy makers and political actors as such, but it can equally be shown to influence IR theory and methodology, i.e. the ‘world-views’ that have underpinned the very epistemology of the discipline.

While the culture concept was a newcomer, a concern with ideas and values had always been a cornerstone of Liberal theoretical approaches, and even neo-Realism had from the 1980s sought to incorporate the role of knowledge and information behind political action. However, the notion of culture is much broader than Liberalism’s old stress on ideas. Ideas, after all, can to some extent be objectified as their contents are laid bare and as the carriers of certain ideational complexes can most often be identified. Culture and identity are concepts that are indeed hard to objectify. Moreover, culture is something which is spread among the larger strata, apparently preventing IR from focusing on decision makers and the more easily identifiable institutions within which they function. The notion of ‘culture’ therefore opens the field of investigation in all directions, and seriously problematises the ‘level of analysis’.

The proliferation of IP has therefore posed a challenge to the dominant theories within IR. It most evidently challenges Realism and Neo-Realism, and for two main reasons. First, Realism sees the state as the central actor in politics. Second, Realism imagines the actors in politics, whether states or individuals, as rational actors who calculate the outcomes of their actions. The latter view, of course, has always been part and parcel of mainstream economic theory, also known as Rational Choice theory. Realism, more than any other theoretical paradigm, depends upon the notion of politics as interest-driven.

14 Culture and International Relations, edited by Jongsuk Chay, New York, Praeger, 1990 It should be said that the volume was of a very mixed quality, despite interesting contributions by Johan Galtung, Michael Haas and Richard A. Falk.

15 See for example the more influential, The return of culture and identity in IR theory, Edited by Y. Lapid and F. Kratochwil, Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1996.

It is clear that the notion of ‘identity’ questions the rational choice view of political actors: more than strategic calculations, identity politics centres on the more fluid field of meaning and interpretation: how the actors share certain values or norms, how they interpret the cultural roots of their political association etc. Many types of political action are not easily explained by rational choice theory: racism is, strictly speaking, not rational. Yet it can and has informed political actions. International voluntary service is not primarily about power maximizing, yet luckily some people continue to do it. Suicide terrorism is extremely hard to explain, let alone understand, with Realist tools, yet unfortunately some people do it.

It also seems evident that many new political and social movements operate below and beyond the limits of the nation-state. Identity groups – collectivities based on ethnicity, religion or other ascriptive traits – can become real political actors, and it is hard to say otherwise considering world politics today. These new actors in politics are one of the reasons why the rather stiff boundary between political science and International Relations is now impossible to uphold: in the postwar period the disciplines developed separately following a rather simplistic division of labour: political scientists dealt with what happens inside states, International Relations analysed what states do once they act externally. That division of labour was in concordance with one of Realism’s basic postulates: that there are different laws of gravity for domestic and international politics, and that as external actors, states follow some basic rules of power-maximization that are independent of the ‘make-up’ of that states.

So whereas the notion of culture was everywhere in the 1990s, IR theory incorporated it somewhat hesitantly. It is still very common to disregard it. One strategy has been to accept the current influence of culture and identity but to relegate that ‘cultural domain’ to the sphere of ‘low Politics’. This amounts to another division of labour that seeks to immunize Realism and reserve ‘High Politics’ to its alleged superior explanatory powers. Some Realists have also accepted elements of social constructivism, arguing that social constructivism does not really oppose Realism: even if individuals’ and states’ interests may in fact be shaped by underlying values and identities, once there, it is there, and we can safely return to realist interest based analysis. This ‘pacification’ of social constructivism even resonates with Alexander Wendt’s own claim that social constructivism is not really a theory.17

5. Political conflict as cultural conflict: Samuel Huntington and IR theory

There was one notable exception to the hesitance of incorporating culture in IR theory: the large-scale theory proposed by Samuel Huntington in his Clash of Civilizations.18 This culturalist theoretical paradigm, although much criticised from within the field of IR, has become very broadly known, and seems to have become influential in actual foreign policy making. Culture matters. But how? Huntington is just the most famous example of a new type of culturalist theory. I discuss some elements of Huntington’s work in the below, not because I find his approach particularly illuminating, but because he kindly makes all the mistakes we should try to avoid. However, the criticisms raised are relevant to ways of thinking and analysing that Huntington has managed to make popular.

I will not resume Huntington’s work, as it is well-known. The basic idea proposed by Huntington was that the new fault lines in world politics were cultural, religious and ethnic, rather than political-ideological. Huntington thereby offered a competing meta-narrative to that of Fukuyama’s End of History thesis. The world had not settled into any final form: huge differences in values not only persisted, but would grow stronger over time, and this would lead to a clash of civilizations, Huntington said. Hence, Huntington argued that the values of liberal democracy and capitalism that Fukuyama had seen as reaching their final destination were mostly Western, and was very skeptical about their diffusion. Lately, Huntington has moved in a somewhat different direction. In a Preface to a recent book co-edited with Lawrence Harrison (called, appropriately, “Culture Matters”), Huntington argues that we can – indeed should - spread ‘Western values’\(^\text{19}\). Although this may seem a real development of Huntington’s work, the line of argumentation hinges upon a notion of culture which is deeply essentialist and static all the way through. Culture is there in the background: it is simply something that exists, and whose existence we can take for granted. Huntington argues from the existence of cultures, and talks nowhere about cultural dynamics. People have cultures. There are cultures in the world. These cultures have ways of thinking, which will influence if not determine individuals’ ways of behaviour.

The striking fact is that Huntington talks about culture much like cultural nationalists do. This conflation of the descriptive and analytical level runs through Huntington’s whole analysis. Huntington does not distinguish between culture as a framing of conflicts, or a strategy employed to recruit combatants, versus culture as an empirical reality which supposedly is itself a cause of conflicts. Even as collectivities involved in identity politics often make reference to historic and ‘primordial’ communities (“This is who we really are, and who we have always been”), a primordialist approach to identity politics should be ruled out from the beginning. The cultural communities to which the political movements make reference are reshaped, reinvented or created in and through the political process that we are asked to analyse. The taken-for-grantedness of the particular identity of the group and the timeless reality of its existence may be a very real sentiment among its participants, but it is not an approach the analyst can or should afford himself.

Let me provide one more example from the history of Catalan nationalism. During the 19\(^\text{th}\) century, the majority of upper-class families in Barcelona had adopted the Castillian language, and had little interest in the struggle for Catalan culture. This changed towards the end of the century: the elites became Catalan-oriented. They changed their language, and also their self-identification. They started to support the cause for Catalan independence. Why this change? Well, one factor was the weakening of the Spanish Empire which eventually lost its overseas colonies, which again had been crucial to the Catalan textile export. The economic elites in Barcelona had simply lost their incentive to be part of the Castillian crown, and increasingly felt injured by Spain’s agricultural tariff policies. This change of cultural identification may seem ‘artificial’: but it is very real, as social construction of reality always is. The inclusion of the economic elites in the nationalist struggle has always distinguished Catalan from Basque nationalism.

Cultures change. Sometimes more rapidly than we like to think. There are many examples of national identities that have been invented and diffused within a few generations – one could even claim that this is the norm. As against this, one may of course try to claim that beneath

the more labile and shifting national identities there exist deeper, often religious, identities, and this is partly what Huntington does. However the same argument can be made about religions: they themselves need to be historicised. The very spread of World religions happened in very concentrated historical periods, characterised by imperial expansion and political violence. Moreover, the World Religions have been in constant development since, partly due to their resistance against and interweaving with political empires, partly due to internal schisms. Religions, as little as nations, are simple ‘there’.

This all means that Culture cannot be treated as a ‘thing’: this is a major flaw in Huntington’s theory of political conflict, but in fact not only his. Huntington talks about culture almost like genetic codes. To Huntington, it seems, ‘culture’ is like a microchip inserted in people’s brain (and staying with the language of computers, Huntington now happens to believe that the micro-chip can be recoded). True enough, this follows anthropological definitions of culture as they developed in the period 1850-1950, where culture was metaphorised like a human body or an organism, the underlying metaphor of both evolutionism and functionalism. Levi-Straussian structuralism would rather see culture like an underlying text, always in need to be ‘written’, and this was the beginning of the rupture with the nominalist understandings of culture which were eventually abandoned.

It is far beyond the scope of this paper to summarise the culture debate in anthropology, but suffice to say that in both anthropology and sociology ‘culture’ has for the last 40 to 50 years been reconceptualised as related to world-construction and practice. The shift was famously signalled by Pierre Bourdieu who in stead of ‘culture’ invoked the notion of Habitus20, a term he borrowed from Norbert Elias to denote bodily installed dispositions towards behaviour, influenced by the social field in which behaviour took place and by the actor’s strategies for action21. From the 1990s, the culture concept went through a further series of critiques and reconceptualisations, heavily affected by the globalization debate. For example, due to processes of deterritorialization the very idea that ‘cultures’ can be geographically delimited is no longer a taken-for-granted. It has also become clear that single persons do not enact just ‘one culture’, but rather is influenced by, and participates in, a plurality of ‘cultural streams’. The very idea that there are a certain number of cultures in the World, that we can identify and study as cultural wholes was critical even for anthropologists who worked with small-scale societies in the beginning of the 20th century, and they eventually left it behind. But it becomes an outright absurdity when applied to large-scale societies today.

The problem is that as the anthropological notion of culture entered the political sciences, it did so with a notion of culture that had been completely abandoned from within the cultural sciences. The culture concept that political scientists and later IR theorists borrowed from anthropology was one that anthropologists had long superseded. It may be that there is a reason for this particular usage of the culture concept, having to do with simplicity: the old-fashioned notion of culture as in-born thoughts and patterns of behaviour, shared by a geographicaly delimited population, is somehow more touchable and available to model-building: its thing-like character and its territorial boundedness lends itself more easily to causal theory. Indeed, good theories should remain simple, but not at the expense of being misleading.

21 Norbert Elias, *The Civilising Process*, Oxford Blackwell, revised edition, 2000. One of Elias’ arguments in the Civilising Process had in fact been that a certain type of Habitus develops together with political processes, and Elias’ specific point was that state-formation and self-formation were interrelated processes.
In Huntington’s work, the essentialising tendency is duplicated at the level of Civilization. Indeed, civilizations are like cultures, just at a higher level of abstraction. Huntington’s definition goes as follows:

“A civilization is the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species”\(^\text{22}\).

Huntington basically says that the world is composed of a finite number of Civilizations, and this idea has spread with remarkable success from the 1990s. These civilizations too are presented as entities, and rather closed entities in fact. Huntington largely defines these civilizations as areas of religious faith, as he for example talks about the Confucian, Islamic, and Orthodox civilizations\(^\text{23}\). Here again, Huntington’s argument is only very superficially historical. He does indeed claim that “civilizations are dynamic; they rise and fall”, but there is no attempt to explain this dynamic, and once the analysis starts the civilizations that Huntington lists appear like static and timeless entities. Huntington talks constantly of historic boundaries and mentions historical events such as the battle between “the Arabs” and “the Christians” in 732. This is a use of history which one recognizes from popular discourse, and from political agitators who seek to mobilise people on the basis of selected historical events that pit “Us” against “Them”. Furthermore, for someone who wishes to explain conflict and violence, it is equally serious that Huntington fails to take up the question of civilizational dynamics, as the dangerous spread of political violence historically speaking happened in the context of expanding and declining empires.

The concept of ‘civilization’ is not an easy one either, and it is equally beyond the scope of this paper to survey that conceptual discussion, which is of course intimately related to the culture-concept debate. However, even here Huntington bypasses the conceptual and analytical refinements established by thinkers of rank. In contrast to Huntington’s essentialist notions of civilization, one can with gain go back and enjoy the French historian Fernand Braudel’s far more nuanced definition:

“Civilizations are as peaceful as they are bellicose: even if they are a singular staticity, they are at the same time dynamic, wandering, animated by flows and swirls, in prey of Browninan motions up to the last detail. Like sand dunes…”\(^\text{24}\).

This definition suggests that certain areas may develop commonalities in outlook, but the beautiful metaphor of sand dunes also suggests change within stability. Braudel’s definition involves no assumption about an inherent bellicose nature of ‘civilizations’.

After having published the first edition of “The Mediterranean World”, in the early 1960s Braudel did in fact attempt to make a comparative analysis of the World’s major civilizations, translated into English as “A History of Civilizations”\(^\text{25}\). The fine conceptual discussion that


\(^{23}\) Following this logic, Huntington does not know what to do with Africa, and consequently leaves it aside in the analysis (it is a “perhaps-civilization”).


precedes Braudel’s analysis ends with the cautionary remark: “Rather then any theory of civilization, therefore, we must study real instances if we wish to understand what civilization is.”

Huntington’s work is curiously empty of those ‘real instances’ that Braudel goes on to describe. It is little known, but particularly interesting for this discussion, that Braudel in this work uses the expression, “a clash between civilizations.” He does so in a very specific context, namely while introducing the concepts of ‘refusal’ and ‘acceptance’, i.e. the ways in which civilizations choose to incorporate or refuse influences, either from other civilizations or from their own past. Even though Braudel’s analysis is structuralist (he talks about ‘enduring traits’ of a civilization), it is open toward real historical dynamics, caused both by internal dynamics and external influences, and by how external influences are interpreted and carried on in new contexts. It is exactly this kind of analytical framework which Huntington does not develop, and which makes his very notion of a ‘clash’ analytically empty. It is also not without interest that the “clash between civilizations” that Braudel mentions relates to internal schisms in Christianity and in the Western World. Moreover – and this should not be forgotten – Braudel’s point was exactly that something like a Mediterranean Civilization had developed, cutting across the religious divides that Huntington assumes to be the basic building blocks in the present world system.

6. How does culture influence political or social behaviour?

This is of course a question we cannot overlook. It is not an easy question, but it is pretty basic. It is already problematic to assume the existence of different cultures existing in geographical blocs – but even of this were so, how do these “cultures” and “civilizations” translate into action? If one wants to argue that the major international conflicts today are about culture, one would expect to find at least the elements of such a theory. What is it that make Confucians act like they do? One can read Huntington over and again, without finding even a trace of such a theory.

The idea that cultural and religious attitudes may influence human behaviour is not new. It was most famously argued by Max Weber. But in contrast to current IR theory of the culturalist school, Max Weber’s sociology of religion does in fact contain important methodological and theoretical departures for understanding the role of religion as it comes to influence social action. In the Protestant Ethic, Weber stressed that he was not interested in religious doctrines per se, but only in religious doctrines to the extent that they in some instances came to shape and direct social action. The strength of Weber’s analysis was exactly that he developed an analytical and conceptual framework of social action as he proceeded with his empirical research. Weber looked at how certain socio-economic groups became

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26 Ibid., p. 36.
27 Ibid., p. 30.
28 Braudel hints to the possibility that the political groupings in the Cold War period to some extent were produced by underlying civilizational differences, and consequent ‘refusals’ of external models. If so, this serves to correct the by now widely diffused idea that ideologically driven conflict was suddenly replaced by culturally driven conflicts after the end of the Cold War. Following Braudel, it is more likely the case that civilizational patterns and cultural configurations always exist as temporal and structural layers of analysis underpinning power politics.
29 A related critique of Huntington, rooted in empirical research more than in conceptual analysis, is of course that many political conflicts today in fact do not take place over these civilizational fault lines, but develop within them. Furthermore, even current political alliances are built across Huntington’s civilizational fault lines. The enduring US – Saudi-Arabian alliance represents one striking ‘anomaly’ to Huntington’s framework.
30 Max Weber, Den Protestantiske Etik og Kapitalismens And, København, Nansensgade Antikvariat, 1996.
carriers of specific world-views, and how these world-views developed together with their real-life activities, as traders or artisans, for example. Weber would then analyse how in specific historical moments, often liminal moments, certain groups would manage to ‘stamp’ their ethos onto the surrounding society, sometimes introducing that ethos into new socio-economic environments. Weber argued that the religious attitude of hard work mixed with a renouncing of the pleasures of the body that had developed in the monasteries became part of the capitalist spirit. From this analysis followed Weber’s diagnosis of the modern capitalist as the this-worldly asceticist. Weber’s analysis also inspired a series of works that looked at the link between religion and political development, taking cue from Weber’s own concept of the ‘religious rejections of the World’ and their ‘directions’, i.e. their lasting effects within the different social, cultural and political realms that make up human existence.

In Huntington’s work there is no credible causal link between actors (civilizations) and their actions (real political events, wars). It is assumed that religious and ethnic identification guide action, but it is never really shown in the empirical analysis. Huntington does not prove his theory in any way, he just gathers data that superficially seems to support the new culturalist view. In a strict sense, this is not a new kind of political science and it is certainly not a real IR ‘theory’.

There is another issue related to this, and it has to do with a certain conception, implicit, but sometimes even explicit, about cultural boundaries. Huntington represents the now widespread idea that political conflicts in world-politics are driven by cultural and/or civilizational differences. The underlying view is that there is something inherently dangerous about cultural boundaries: that cultural boundaries, in Huntington’s vocabulary, by some inherent logic, tend to become the political ‘fault lines’. Huntington commits a serious theoretical error here: he insists on division, separation, and the opposition against Others as the basis for any self-perception and for group identity as such. The approach does not go very deep, and makes no reference to the long tradition of work on identity formation within psychology or anthropology. This is Huntington’s philosophy of identity as stated bluntly in his Clash of Civilizations:

“We know who we are only when we know who we are not and often only when we know who we are against”.

In Huntington’s analysis, of course, the stress is very much on the ‘against’. Now, it may be true that any kind of identity is oppositional – it is a basic point raised even by clinical psychologists. But ‘oppositional’ need not mean a necessary war-like state of affairs. It can simply mean that we understand ourselves in comparison and relation to others – as in gender identity. Here Huntington elegantly dismisses the phenomenological tradition and the role of intersubjectivity as crucial to identity formation. He overlooks, for example, Merleau-Ponty’s point about mutual recognition as the basis for self-development. The ‘oppositional’ nature of identity formation may indeed imply mutual constructiveness. Huntington’s superficial universalising of self-other oppositions as inherently conflictual is not only theoretically flawed: as others have pointed out, the construction of reality which the ‘theory’ does create is indeed incredibly dangerous. This is certainly not only a problem with Huntington’s analysis. The idea is increasingly accepted that cultural differences will easily lead to conflict: indeed, the very notion of ‘ethnic war’ which we use increasingly to describe a political conflict, often

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implies that a certain conflict is not only bespoken with the idiom of ethnicity, but that the very conflict is *caused* by ethnic differences.

Huntington’s approach stops us from asking the question which political and social scientists *should* be asking: *when* do cultural differences and cultural boundaries become problematic fault lines? When do cultural self-other perceptions become enemy-images? When do mechanisms of *recognition* go astray? I admit that there is no easy answer to these questions, and I cannot here even provide the beginning of an answer. But it is certainly *here* our theorising should start. It is also here, I believe, that anthropology and political science could use each other more constructively. There are elements of conflict theory to be found in several branches of ‘cultural theory’ that IR has so far remained blind to. The sudden and sometimes uncontrollable escalation of violence inside societies was, for example, a very important part of Rene Girard’s classic analysis of ‘Violence and the Sacred’ and of the *Scapegoat*32. Girard argued that situations of crisis (or ‘liminality’) in small-scale societies can easily degenerate into full-blown violence, due to the imitative aspect of human nature, and this escalation of violence can only be stopped by the identification and sacrifice of an innocent victim, the scapegoat. To Girard, the escalation of violence had to do with lack of discernment and the failure to uphold distinctions.

Huntington’s theory of political conflict is not only a bad theory; it is no theory at all. Theory involves concepts as linked to propositions about social dynamics, a set of generalizations demonstrated and grounded in empirical analysis. Huntington’s approach is a step backwards to of a way of thinking in which there was no recognition of political science’s methodical link between the empirical-analytical level and the conceptualising moment33. To put it crudely, it is a return to pre-science couched in scientism.

The conditions under which cultural boundaries become problematic are evidently related to social, economic and political factors – i.e. to both cultural and non-cultural factors. One of them is of course ‘class’. Ethnic and national movements have always downplayed any notion of class, since class-based politics cuts across ethnic identity and hence work against the ideological construct of nationalism. A dangerous tendency in ethnic and national movements is in fact to reduce or negate any kind of internal complexity of the group, while emphasising and absolutising the external boundary to the cultural Other. This reduction of complexity to a world of easily recognisable Others is certainly an important element in the escalation of ethnic and nationalist conflict. It works at the symbolic level, but sometimes it implies a real destruction as well. But we should scrutinise this process, not let our analysis be guided by it.

It is therefore all the more surprising that a similar move of replacing socio-economic conditions with cultural factors has taken place within the social and political sciences. Ethnicity and cultural and religious identity has replaced class, even at the *analytical level*. This is a really problematic tendency, and it is all the more surprising that it should have happened within disciplines with strong ‘realist’ roots. It is clear that ‘class’ is not what it used to be, and no-one would wish to return to another kind of reductionsim, which is Marxism. But it is also clear that the groups of people who feel attracted to radical

nationalism are not simply recruited from anywhere. The same can be argued for the various types of ‘religious fundamentalism’ that are indeed spreading today. We need only think about developments that have changed the parameters of politics in countries like Turkey and India. The development is quite parallel, and again suggests that we should not see Islamic developments in isolation. India after 1945 was built up like a secular nation-state, on the model of Nehruism, as was Turkey after 1922 with its corresponding Kemalism. Both of these secular models of the nation-state have been undermined or at least reconfigured since the 1980s, and mainly so by religious movements and parties. Turkish politics has been Islamized as Indian Politics has been Hinduised, a development no-one had foreseen. I take both countries to be real examples of the force and reality of contemporary identity politics.

A superficial reading of these developments suggests that these new political identities evidently cannot be class-based, since the unifying factor, religion, goes beyond class. Yet, class configurations or ‘status groups’ are enormously important to the theoretical understanding of religious politics. Following again Weber here, we should always look at the socio-economic groups who become carriers of certain world-views, and understand the conditions under which those view can spread to the wider society. If we consider the force of religious politics in the Middle East, that struggle against the locally established elites is likewise a struggle against Western influence, and what is perceived as Western identification models. Superficially, this again shows that Huntington is right: that we have civilizations pitted against each other because of different world-views. But while this is what some of the actors themselves argue, it certainly cannot explain what is going on. Again, we have to ask exactly in what kind of situation some people mange to mobilise others in the name of ‘civilization’, or in the name of this or that religion. It often turns out that the sectors of society supportive of religious revival are in fact struggling against the old established elites and the clientelistic systems that had spread within the given polity. It is not only a class-struggle, but often it is also that.

To sum up the above discussion: It turns out that Huntington has indeed made a strange move: while introducing Culture as a key concept to the way in which we think about political conflict (and recently into development studies) he has managed to carry on the epistemological basis of Realism. We may therefore baptize Huntington’s approach ‘Cultural Realism’. I take it to be a self-contradictory term. The attempt, by Huntington and others, has been to introduce ‘culture’ while leaving intact a certain scientist approach to human affairs. He is not the only one to have done so. One need only think of certain positivist versions of social psychology who seek to demonstrate how human needs shape political action, equally forgetting that human needs are not constant. Or rather, those needs that are constant are exactly not the ones that determine politics. It is the stirring of human emotions and identities that need to be analysed, not their underlying ‘reality’; it is the process, not the thing.

Whereas classical realism took the state for granted and imbued it with certain universalistic behaviour patterns, cultural realism takes cultures and civilizations as the basic building blocs. Huntington’s culturalist theory stops right where the political analysis should start. It takes for granted everything what ought to be explained. It has incorporated culture into mainstream thinking about global political conflict, but it has left the causal link between culture and politics untouched. As such it is worse than nothing: for even though the theory is flawed, it is nice and easy to think with – and this is what many people do, policy makers included.

7. Conclusion: the role of culture in Conflict Resolution
For more than a century, cultures were posited primarily as technologies of discrimination and separation, factories of differences and oppositions. Yet dialogue and negotiation are also cultural phenomena – and such as are given in our times of plurality an ever-rising, perhaps decisive, importance. (…) One can express about cultural plurality the same opinion Gadamer expressed about the plurality of cognitive horizons: if understanding is a miracle, it is a daily miracle and one accomplished by ordinary people, not professional miracle-makers.4

What I have argued in the above is the need to look at cultural dynamics without treating culture as a ‘thing’ or as an independent variable. I have also suggested that in some cases identity and identity politics are potentially as important as power and interest politics in the analysis of political conflict. Let me finish by relating that conclusion to the area of conflict resolution. For if the identity dimensions are evidently part of the development of political conflict, and cannot be reduced to a ‘superstructure’ of the material interests at stake, this ought to have some consequences for models of conflict resolution, and the ways in which those models are applied in practice. This is an area where much work is still to be done.

Since the early 1990s there has been a wide discussion of the role of culture in negotiation within the fields of business and diplomacy, whereas the culture-debate in conflict resolution was slower to take off. There is probably one main reason for this hesitance: the fact that IR developed throughout the 20th century to deal with inter-state conflict, where identity issues were admittedly less central. In the early 1990s there was quite a lot of optimism as the Cold War came to a relatively peaceful end. Yet the World did not become more peaceful. Cold War politics have to some extent been replaced by “ethnic-political conflict”, and Huntington was of course right that a growing number of political conflicts that break out today are not between states, but between cultural groups – ethnic or religious – that live together within states. This sort of conflict are more clearly about identity issues: about rights, status, and recognition, and conflicting cultural interpretations of history and peoplehood.

An example could be the long-lasting political conflict in Northern Ireland: economic deprivation, struggle over territory, and uneven distribution of political power were certainly main factors in the development of conflict. However, the symbolic dimensions of the conflict – national, cultural and religious, historical memory – have evidently been core issues to the partners in the conflict. Likewise, the Rwandan conflict that exploded in the mid 1990s was certainly about power, territory and interest, but at stake were also certain interpretations, certain symbolic constructions of Rwanda as a cultural and political space. As argued above, it may even be difficult to divide the ‘real’ from the ‘symbolic’ dimensions of a conflict, as claims to land are always based on certain culture-dependent interpretations that are core to collective identities. Without underpinning policial claims with cultural identity, political leaders rarely manage to mobilise the populace they claim to represent.

Traditional methods of conflict resolution were not modelled to deal with intra-state conflicts. Moreover, the very notion of ‘conflict’ was tied to an understanding of conflict as interest-based. Take for example this classical definition of conflict by Coser:

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“Conflict is a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure or eliminate rivals.”35

This power politics approach belonged to political Realism36. To some extent this approach to conflict was of course meaningful in the Cold War period, but it is clearly insufficient to deal with today’s realities, and will in most cases result misleading. The definition fails to address what conflict is often about, as it fails to indicate strategies of the actors beyond the undesirable ‘elimination’ of ‘rivals’.

The culture discussion started to inform conflict resolution especially toward the end of the 1990s. One important contribution was made by Kevin Avruch, in “Culture and Conflict Resolution”37. Avruch identified not only a lack of concern for culture in IR, but also a bewildering and often misleading notion of culture when it actually was used. Avruch identified a series of untenable assumptions about culture: that it is homogenous, uniformly distributed among members of a group, and that it is static. In stead, Avruch advocated a notion of culture which is dynamic and mobile, and derivative of individual experience, much in line with what was argued in the above sections. While such a dynamic notion of culture established in anthropology from the 1980s, Avruch also noted how IR and conflict resolution had remained relatively immune to it. Following a realist logic, it had been easier to incorporate ‘culture’ understood as a unified whole whose characteristics can be objectively elicited by the analyst.

A dynamic and fluid notion of culture is of course more difficult to deal with, and it is indeed almost impossible to set up predictive models with it. However, if a certain loss of predictability is the price to pay for working with more realistic concepts, it might be a price worth paying. Recognizing the cultural aspects of conflict development, some conflict theorists have suggested that intervention should start with the more psycho-cultural dynamics of the conflict, and thereafter move to solutions dealing with the more material and tangible interests at play38. This approach, which is taking shape these years, could be referred to as ‘identity-based conflict resolution’. It seems clear that in conflicts which involve more than struggle over resources and other tangible issues, bargaining over those issues without a prior consideration of identity issues may indeed have the effect of further polarizing the involved parties: the actors in the conflict risk being constructed as absolute groups in the very bargaining process, and there is no return or development towards alternative visions of personal and collective identities. Arguably, the Dayton Peace Accords produced a similar effect: the logics of the peace negotiators was not very different from the cruel logic of ethnic cleansing. The partition of land did not address the underlying issue of recognising cultural diversity, and hence the conflict was never really solved. The negotiations involved no real dialogue between the different communities, but went straight to the interest issues: distribution of land and power. As a short-term solution, the peace agreements ‘functioned’ as a peace fire was established, but the underlying issues were never dealt with. One could argue

36 The ‘values’ referred to in the definition clearly refers to political ideologies, as these differed in the Cold War period, and not to ‘cultural values’ writ large
37 Kevin Avruch, Culture and Conflict Resolution, 2000 (2d edition), Washington DC, United States Institute for Peace.
that some of the material interests at play, territory and political representation, would have lost some their conflictual character if the identity-dimension had been dealt with successfully.

What this all means in practice is still to be worked out. It may simply mean not to start with the division of territory, and to look for a place to draw the boundary between two groups, but with giving voice to the hopes, fears and concerns that orient the actos in the conflict. This may be the only way to establish some view and perception of group identities that need not be mutually exclusive. This is of course complex, and it requires time. In Interest-Based conflicts the issues are concrete and clearly defined; in identity-based conflicts the issues are abstract, complex and difficult to define: desired outcomes cannot be pinned down to tangible interests or resources. They involve interpretations of history, group psychology and sometimes self-definitions that often do seem mutually exclusive.

On the positive side, if the resources are also of a more symbolic character, conflict resolution might not be a zero-sum game: in negotiations over meaning there might be a chance to establish areas of resonance between two or more positions. The zero-sum game approach is difficult to avoid when two groups claim ownership over the same piece of territory: the discussion will often be narrowed down to where to draw the lines. But to have different groups of people, with different narratives and different types of identity living within the same territory is not impossible. In fact, when we think of it, this is how most of human civilization has proceeded for the last 5000 years.

END.

Abstract:
This article discusses the use of the culture concept in political science and IR theory. Providing a variety of examples of the influence of culture on political processes, the article illustrates the real need to incorporate cultural analysis in the understanding of politics and political conflict today. However, the article warns against simplistic understandings of what ‘culture’ is, and how it can be incorporated in explanatory frameworks. It seems that the notion of ‘culture’ that most political scientists and IR scholars have adopted was one that anthropologists deconstructed and left behind several decades ago. The article critically discusses the ‘culturalist’ approach proposed by Samuel Huntington, and makes the basic criticism that Huntington conflates the descriptive and analytical levels, and hence essentialises both ‘culture’ and ‘civilization’. Furthermore, Huntington seriously fails to address the cultural dynamics that may under certain circumstances lead to political conflict.