

WESTERN ETHNOCENTRISM AS A CULTURAL ILLUSION

Costel IORDAN¹

ABSTRACT:

PEOPLE FROM DIFFERENT CULTURES HAVE ATTACKED EACH OTHER MANY TIMES THROUGHOUT HISTORY. THIS PHENOMENON STILL CONTINUES TO BE AN ISSUE OF DEBATE AND THE RECENT CONFLICTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND THE TERRORIST ATTACKS - SUCH AS THE ONE ON WORLD TRADE CENTER IN 2001- HAVE CAUSED AN INCREASE OF ATTENTION AND AN ESCALATION FEAR FOR THIS TYPE OF CONFLICT. ACCORDING TO HUNTINGTON, IN TODAY'S WORLD, THE REALITIES OF GLOBAL POLITICS ARE SHAPED BY THE CONFLICT BETWEEN TWO OPPOSITE CIVILIZATIONS, WEST AND ISLAM. THUS, BOTH SIDES CLAIM THE CENTRALITY AND IMPLICIT SUPERIORITY OF ONE CULTURAL IDENTITY OVER THE OTHER, AND TRY TO IMPOSE A WORLDVIEW BY REPRESENTING THE OTHER IN A DISTORTED AND STYLIZED IMAGE. THESE CLAIMS ARE NOTHING MORE THAN ILLUSIONS CONDITIONED BY THEIR POSITIONING IN A SPECIFIC CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE THAT OUGHT TO BE OVERCOME TO PROTECT AND PROMOTE DIVERSITY.

KEYWORDS: ETHNOCENTRISM, CIVILIZATION, WEST, ORIENTALISM, CULTURAL RELATIVISM

In his work, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Samuel P. Huntington combined various types of cultural differences and predicted that “culture and cultural identities, which at the broadest level are civilization identities, are shaping the patterns of cohesion, disintegration, and conflict in the post-Cold War world.”² Cultural

¹PhD Student, Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iasi, Roumania, iordan.v.costel@gmail.com

² Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 20.

conflicts do exist, despite some voices in the literature stating that such conflicts do not reach the level anticipated by Huntington.

The topic of this paper is the analysis of Western ethnocentrism as a cultural illusion, and the reference framework for this approach is Huntington's paradigm of *clash of civilizations*. To begin with, I shall detail what ethnocentrism is, what are its features and types, and subsequently I shall point out the manner in which Western ethnocentrism is manifested in relation to the Muslim East (Islam), to what extent ethnocentrism is indistinguishable from cultural illusion, as well as possible means of acting against this universal phenomenon.

The anthropologist William Graham Sumner was the one who invented the concept of ethnocentrism. In his classical definition, ethnocentrism is described as “this view of things in which one’s own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it.... Each group nourishes its own pride and vanity, boasts itself superior, exalts its own divinities, and looks with contempt on outsiders. Each group thinks its own folkways the only right ones, and if it observes that other groups have other folkways, these excite its scorn.”³

According to this perspective, each individual tends to assign positive attitudes toward one’s own group and negative attitudes toward all the other groups.

The theory of ethnocentrism as a body of observations and interpretations plays a central role within the social sciences and it is relevant to inter-group conflicts. On this line, Paul C. Rosenblatt emphasizes the importance of addressing this universal phenomenon by interpreting ethnocentrism and nationalism as two similar concepts: “first, they appear so often during the formation and continued existence of relatively stable social collectivities (from informal small groups to societies) that understanding of them may well provide some insight into the nature of social collectivities. Second, they are frequently cited as the cause of serious problems in the world; an examination of them may lead to an increase in the ability to cope with these problems.”⁴

Claude Lévi-Strauss defines ethnocentric attitude as “the attitude of longest standing which no doubt has a firm psychological foundation, as it tends to reappear in each one of us when we are caught unawares, is to reject out of hand the cultural institutions-ethical,

³ William Graham Sumner, *Folkways: A Study of the Sociological Importance of Usages, Manners, Customs, Mores, and Morals* (Boston: Ginn, 1906), 13.

⁴Paul C. Rosenblatt, “Origins and effects of group ethnocentrism and nationalism,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 8 (1964): 131, accessed August 6, 2011, doi: 10.1177/002200276400800204.

religious, social or aesthetic which are furthest removed from those with which we identify ourselves.”⁵ In their analysis of ethnocentrism, Larry A. Samovar, Richard E. Porter and Edwin R. McDaniel point out a multilevel approach of the concept, each level representing a type of ethnocentrism expressing different gradual attitudes and tendencies:

“Ethnocentrism can be viewed as having three levels: *positive*, *negative*, and *extremely negative*. The first, *positive*, is the belief that, at least for you, your culture is preferred over all others. This is natural, and inherently there is nothing wrong with it because you draw much of your personal identity and many of your beliefs from your native culture. At the *negative* level, you partially take on an evaluative dimension. You believe your culture is the center of everything and all other cultures should be measured and rated by its standards.”⁶

The existence of a close connection between ethnocentrism and culture, a connection that is relevant for the analysis undertaken in this paper, prompts me to make a few specifications concerning the concept of culture. Irrespective of its assigned meanings, culture is one of the elements that define society. It may be considered a genuine source of power or, at least, something in the absence of which power cannot last for a long time. All its constitutive elements influence and shape us, humans, as well as the societies we live in.

From an anthropological point of view, culture refers to universal human ability to categorize, codify and communicate the experiences in a symbolic manner, while from a psychological point of view, culture is a multi-functional concept which allows us to distinguish between groups. At a simple level, culture is used to describe and categorize people, while at a more complex level it is used to explain the (cultural) variations in the behaviors of different groups of people in different locations.⁷

The possibility of learning culture from birth through language acquisition and socialization, the fact that it is learned, usually, at an uncounscious level, shared by all members of the same cultural group, its adaptive character to specific environmental conditions, its cyclical and dynamic nature, and its evolutionary character are in close connection with ethnocentrism’s features. Authors, like Robert A. Levine and Donald T. Campbell, emphasize this relationship viewing ethnocentrism as a natural product of immersion in a particular culture. In this sense, ethnocentric tendencies emerge as a result

⁵ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Race and history* (Paris: UNESCO, 1952), 11.

⁶ Larry A. Samovar, Richard E. Porter, and Edwin R. McDaniel, *Communication between cultures*, 7th ed. (Boston: Wadsworth, 2009), 180.

⁷ David Matsumoto and Linda Juang, *Culture and Psychology* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2003), 9.

of exposure to one's own culture. In other words, ethnocentrism is inherent to any culture. Ethnocentrism is a natural universal phenomenon which requires certain aspects in order to take place. First, there must be an interaction between at least two groups, and these groups must have different cultural backgrounds and beliefs. The ethnocentric attitudes and behavior emerge as a result of the interaction which involves conflicting views or concerns that cause the participants to question the other's values.⁸

Below I shall refer to the model of the *clash of civilizations* proposed by Samuel P. Huntington, in order to describe Western ethnocentrism in relation to Islamic ethnocentrism.

In Huntington's view, civilization is „a cultural entity”⁹, most often having religion as its defining feature, which he claims to be the central unit in the characteristics of civilizations. The American scholar argues that in the post-Cold War world, the critical distinctions between people are primarily cultural, and not ideological or economic, and that the realities of global politics in the the *twenty-first century* will be shaped by the conflict between two opposite civilizations, West and Islam.

According to Huntington, the essence of Western civilization is based on the following factors: the Classical legacy (Greek philosophy and rationalism, Roman law etc.), Catholicism and Protestantism, European languages, separation of spiritual and temporal authority, rule of law, social pluralism, representative bodies and individualism. These factors, or the combination of them, gave the West its distinctive quality.¹⁰ Similarly, Philippe Nemo states that Western civilization can be primarily defined through the rule of law, democracy, intellectual liberties, critical rationality, science, and economic freedom founded on private property. However, none of the aforementioned aspects is a natural one. Its values and institutions are the fruit of a long historical construction.¹¹

Given that ethnocentrism asserts the centrality and implied superiority of one cultural identity over others, describing how individuals represent the “Other” as alien, imposing, at the same time, a worldview, its use, in this manner, can be identified in Edward Said's work, *Orientalism*.¹² For Said, Orientalism „as a Western style for

⁸ Leonie L. Sutherland, “Ethnocentrism in a pluralistic society: a concept analysis,” *Journal of Transcultural Nursing* 13 (2002): 276, accessed August 22, 2011, doi:10.1177/104365902236701.

⁹ Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, 41.

¹⁰ Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, 69-72.

¹¹ Philippe Nemo, *Qu'est-ce que l'Occident ?* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004), 7.

¹² Chris Barker, *The Sage Dictionary of Cultural Studies* (London: Sage Publications, 2004), 64.

dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient’’¹³ provided the conceptual framework, intellectual legitimation for the appropriation of Orient through colonialism. The concept promoted „the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, "us") and the strange (the Orient, the East, "them"). This vision in a sense created and then served the two worlds thus conceived. Orientals lived in their world, "we" lived in ours.’’¹⁴

To the extent that the West’s definition requires an opposite pole that would consolidate the mythological belief concerning this super-identity, the authors supporting the Western dogma feel the need to underline the inferiority of the East, represented as Islam. For example, in the nineteenth century, Ernest Renan defined Western civilization as Aryan, and, therefore, the only one capable of progress and sophistication, in contradiction and antithesis with Islam. In Renan’s view, Islam is the absolute denial of Europe, is bigotry, contempt for science, suppression of the civil society, terrible simplicity of semitic spirit, abatement of cognitive abilities, closed mind regarding sensitive ideas, and refined feeling, in order to promote an eternal tautology: God is God.¹⁵

Some scholars, such as E. Franco, K. Preisendanz, R. Robertson, și B. Turner, consider Orientalism as an ideology that belonged to a period of history that is now behind us, while others, such as Patricia Crone, Daniel Pipes și John Hall, believe that the old patterns of human history and destiny which had shaped the West-and-Islam dualism have not simply been removed; they have been reconstituted, redeployed, redistributed in a globalised framework and have shaped a new paradigm which can be called “neo-Orientalism”. Thus, neo-Orientalism has in its center the same structure as the classical Orientalism, in the sense that it searches for an essence of the “Other” in a dualist perspective.’’¹⁶ The West perceives Islam as a totally different universe, „held responsible for terrorism, the oppression of women, economic underdevelopment, repressive political systems, and a host of other difficulties around the world.’’¹⁷ The perception of Islam as homogenous Islamist terrorist enemy, as the new barbarian of civilization, the remarks of

¹³ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978), 3.

¹⁴ Said, *Orientalism*, 43-44.

¹⁵ Ernest Renan, *Qu’est-ce qu’une nation? Et autres essais politiques* (Paris: Presses Pocket, 1992), 198.

¹⁶ Mohammad Samiei, “Neo-Orientalism? The relationship between the West and Islam in our globalised world,” *Third World Quarterly* 31 (2010): 1148-1149, accessed September 24, 2012, doi:10.1080/01436597.2010.518749

¹⁷ Gregory Starrett, “Islam and the politics of Enchantment,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* N.S. (2009): S222.

Islam's incompatibility with democracy, modernity, capitalism, and human rights are constitutive to neo-Orientalist framework.

Each group is the bearer of specific ethnocentric tendencies and attitudes as a result of the connection with its own culture. In today's world, Western ethnocentrism is identified with neo-Orientalism, while the equivalent concept for Islamic ethnocentrism is Occidentalism. This concept involves distorted and stylized descriptions of the West, as attributed by its enemies. On this line, Occidentalism is "a war against a particular idea of the West, which is neither new nor unique to Islamist extremism. The current jihadis see the West as something less than human, to be destroyed, as though it were a cancer."¹⁸ In other words, Occidentalism is a result of global capitalism, "a revolt against rationalism (the cold, mechanical West, the machine civilization) and secularism, but also against individualism."¹⁹

The last part of this paper will point out the fact that ethnocentrism is indistinguishable from cultural illusion, as well as possible means of acting against this universal phenomenon. For this purpose, we need to define what we mean by illusion in general, and by cultural illusion in particular. The concept of illusion is often used arbitrarily, and requires clarification. An illusion, the dictionary tells us, is

1. "something that deceives or deludes or misleads intellectually in such a way as to produce false impressions or ideas that exaggerate or minimize reality or that attribute existence to what does not exist or nonexistence to what does exist; 2. perception of something objectively existing in such a way as to cause or permit misinterpretation of its actual nature either because of the ambiguous qualities of the thing perceived or because of the personal characteristics of the one perceiving or because of both factors."²⁰

Some of the illusions with outstanding influence on humans are the natural illusions, which are part of the structure of our natural being, and which mislead us in our knowledge of reality. Apart from natural illusions, which continue to manifest themselves despite being demystified by critique, there exists another category of illusions, the cultural ones. The latter, unlike natural illusions, are not part of the structure of our natural being, instead pertaining to our positioning in a certain cultural perspective. It can be said that a cultural

¹⁸ Ian Buruma, "The Origins of Occidentalism," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 50 (2004): 10.

¹⁹ Ian Buruma, "The Origins of Occidentalism," 11.

²⁰ *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language* (London: Merriam-Webster Inc., 1986), 1127.

illusion may be defined as an appearance that operates "as if" it were true, being conditioned by our positioning in a certain cultural perspective.

The main factors that determine the emergence of illusions are motivational and contextual, and the "lack of awareness (to varying degrees) of the illusory element is often the very condition of its productive existence."²¹

Given that there are no absolute criteria for establishing the superiority of one culture over another, to assert a point of view concerning the superiority of Western civilization is to manifest an aspiration that has emerged in one's own civilizational context. In this respect, ethnocentrism appears as a deceiving impression, exaggerating in the positive sense the membership in a group, reducing the variety of all other groups to a collection of negative attributes, opposed to those of one's own group.

Ethnocentrism can be identified with the cultural illusion at the structural level; both concepts contain an emotional and a rational component. In terms of structure, ethnocentrism is an attitude that is favourable for one's own group and unfavourable for the rest of groups, in close relation to a belief that is excessively generalised (and therefore erroneous), which attempts to justify and legitimate our behaviours and attitudes towards the "Other".

Our limited cognitive abilities, guided by our cultural background, our aspirations and fears lead to many correct insights; however, they often lead to errors and illusions. Illusion, in a broad sense, is useful for the human individual, but not at an all-encompassing level.

Ethnocentrism and the cultural illusion can also be indistinguishable in terms of their functional character. On this line, John McClure argues that "at a social level, they prevent people from seeing aspects of their social structure, and legitimize an inequitable society. At the individual level, illusions defend consciousness from knowledge which would produce anxiety."²² Moreover, ethnocentric attitudes and cultural illusions "are produced by processes such as defence mechanisms or ideologies, which propagate false or distorted information that conceals and legitimizes a situation."²³ According to Gary Ferraro și Susan Andreatta, from a functional point of view, ethnocentrism could serve as a positive function of society reinforcing group solidarity, and it serves as a major obstacle to the

²¹ Saul Smilansky, *Free Will and Illusion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 147.

²² John McClure, *Explanations, accounts, and illusions: a critical analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 31.

²³ John McClure, *Explanations, accounts, and illusions*, 31.

understanding of other cultures.²⁴ Anthropologists generally agree that most people are ethnocentric and that some ethnocentrism seems necessary as a kind of glue to hold a society together.²⁵

The opposite of ethnocentrism is cultural relativism. This means that every component of culture (an idea, a thought or a behaviour pattern) must be analysed in its own cultural context, rejecting the notion according to which every culture has a set of absolute standards on which to rely when judging all other cultures. The theory of cultural relativism is approached differently, depending on the position assigned to the Western civilization in relation to the other civilizations. In this respect, if we wish to divide the world into territories by building rigid borders between groups, cultural relativism is mentioned as a positive necessity; whenever we wish to re-establish the superiority of the West and of its civilization, relativism is demonised.²⁶

Ethnocentrism can be perceived as a rejection of cultural diversity if the members of a cultural entity prefer to reject all that is not in accordance with their own behaviour rules. Western ethnocentrism suggests a method for overcoming cultural relativism with the purpose of asserting the superiority and universality of Western civilization: perceiving other cultures as variations of one civilization, namely the Western one. By recognizing the phenomenon of cultural diversity as a mere expression of the various stages of a single process of civilization, cultural difference is, from this perspective, only an appearance destined to disappear sooner or later.²⁷ This manner of presenting the relationship between Western culture and all other cultures is similar to the so-called concept of ‘cultural pseudo-relativism’, according to which Western culture is superior to all others, because is the only one asserting the equality of all cultures. The paradox is obvious here: by asserting the equality of cultures, the West in fact asserts its own superiority. Broadly speaking, the paradox of the West lies in its capacity to produce universals, to elevate them to the ranks of absolutes, to violate the principles of the system they were extracted from and to feel the need to justify theoretically such violations.²⁸

²⁴ Gary Ferraro and Susan Andreatta, *Cultural anthropology: an applied perspective* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2010), 15.

²⁵ Serena Nanda and Richard L. Warms, *Cultural Anthropology* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2007), 17.

²⁶ Annamaria Rivera, *Les derives de l'universalisme: ethnocentrisme et islamophobie en France et en Italie* (Paris: La Découverte, 2010), 52.

²⁷ Denys Cuche, *La notion de culture dans les sciences sociales* (Paris: La Découverte, 2010), 21.

²⁸ Sophie Bessis, *L'Occident et les autres: histoire d'une suprématie* (Paris: La Découverte, 2002), 10.

Ethnocentrism is fundamentally based on individual's exposure to his own culture, even if factors like personality, family, social relationships, and media representation of various groups influence ethnocentric tendencies. To the extent that human beings cannot escape their culture and to the extent that ethnocentrism originates from unconscious thought and feeling, we can argue that ethnocentric attitudes are ineluctable. Nevertheless, ethnocentric tendencies can be reduced or "diverted from their original purpose by cultural programming."²⁹ Permanent removal of certain forms of ethnocentrism remains a project which depends on future transformations within the culture.

The Western world's attitude towards Islam may also be seen as a fit of vanity, bearing in mind that the West is currently consumed by a diplomatic and economic crisis, and by the problems connected to global warming. Today, more than ever before, the West feels the need to take a stand in order to assert its superiority. Given that there are no absolute standards to assert the superiority of one culture over another, the West must admit that, although important, its contributions to the world civilization are just one component out of many. The rejection of other cultures prevents us from being accomplished human beings.

In the future, undoubtedly, economic, political and cultural changes on a backdrop of pronounced globalization will produce new forms of ethnocentrism. Nevertheless, we must trust the human capacity of achieving cultural progress by promoting dialogue and cooperation between cultures. Western and Islamic ethnocentric tendencies can be successfully reduced only if the West and Islam acknowledge plurality, admit cultural diversity and respect the "Other".

²⁹ Kevin MacDonald, "Psychology and White Ethnocentrism," *The Occidental Quarterly* 6 (2006): 7.

This work was supported by the the European Social Fund in Romania, under the responsibility of the Managing Authority for the Sectoral Operational Programme for Human Resources Development 2007-2013 [grant POSDRU/107/1.5/S/78342].

REFERENCES

1. **Barker, Chris.** *The Sage Dictionary of Cultural Studies*. London: Sage Publications, 2004.
2. **Bessis, Sophie.** *L'Occident et les autres: histoire d'une suprématie*. Paris: La Découverte, 2002.
3. **Buruma, Ian.** "The Origins Of Occidentalism." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 50 (2004): 10-12.
4. **Campbell, Donald T., and Levine, Robert A.** *Ethnocentrism: Theories of conflict, ethnic attitudes, and group behavior*. New York: John Wiley, 1972.
5. **Cuche, Denys.** *La notion de culture dans les sciences sociales*. Paris: La Découverte, 2010.
6. **Ferraro, Gary, and Andreatta, Susan.** *Cultural anthropology: an applied perspective*. Belmont: Wadsworth, 2010.
7. **Huntington, Samuel P.** *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.
8. **Lévi-Strauss, Claude.** *Race and history*. Paris: UNESCO, 1952.
9. **MacDonald, Kevin.** "Psychology and White Ethnocentrism." *The Occidental Quarterly* 6 (2006): 7-46.
10. **Matsumoto, David and Juang, Linda.** *Culture and Psychology*. Belmont: Wadsworth, 2003.
11. **McClure, John.** *Explanations, accounts, and illusions: a critical analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
12. **Nanda, Serena, and Warms, Richard. L.** *Cultural anthropology*. Belmont: Wadsworth, 1998.
13. **Nemo, Philippe.** *Qu'est-ce que l'Occident ?*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004.
14. **Renan, Ernest.** *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation? Et autres essais politiques*. Paris: Presses Pocket, 1992.
15. **Rivera, Annamaria.** *Les derives de l'universalisme: ethnocentrisme et islamophobie en France et en Italie*. Paris: La Découverte, 2010.
16. **Rosenblatt, Paul C.** "Origins and Effects of Group Ethnocentrism and Nationalism." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 8 (1964): 131-146. Accessed August 6, 2011. doi: 10.1177/002200276400800204.
17. **Said, Edward W.** *Orientalism*, New York: Random House, 1978.
18. **Samiei, Mohammad.** "Neo-Orientalism? The relationship between the West and Islam in our globalised world." *Third World Quarterly* 31 (2010): 1145–1160. Accessed September 24, 2012. doi:10.1080/01436597.2010.518749.
19. **Samovar, Larry A., Porter, Richard E., McDaniel, Edwin R.** *Communication between cultures*, 7th ed. Boston: Wadsworth, 2009.
20. **Smilansky, Saul.** *Free Will and Illusion*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000.

21. **Starrett, Gregory.** "Islam and the politics of Enchantment." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* N.S. (2009): S222-S240.
22. **Sumner, William Graham.** *Folkways: A Study of the Sociological Importance of Usages, Manners, Customs, Mores, and Morals.* Boston: Ginn, 1906.
23. **Sutherland, Leonie L.** "Ethnocentrism in a pluralistic society: a concept analysis." *Journal of Transcultural Nursing* 13 (2002): 274-281.
24. **Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language.** London: Merriam-Webster Inc., 1986.