

Deconstructing the civilization history

An empirical account of a non-western civilization narrative

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Abstract

This study is aimed at qualitatively and empirically questioning the established notion of a world based on civilizations. The study will take its stance in two fundamentally different theories within the Civilization Paradigm, *The Clash of Civilizations* by Samuel Huntington and *The Clash Within Civilizations* by Dieter Senghaas, and respectively compare these in relation to the empirical data consisting of seven semi-structured interviews conducted with young men and women living in Syria. The purpose of the study is to contrast and compare the narratives presented by the two theories on clashing civilizations with an alternative, non-Western, narrative. This analysis will be done through the lens of Hayden White's theory on historical emplotment and by a methodology of discourse analysis and social constructionism.

The results of the study point toward an alternative and anti-essentialist narrative, presented in the analysis of the interviews, which tend to see the "civilizations" suggested by Huntington and Senghaas as rather heterogeneous, incoherent and contradictory things. The visions of reality mediated by the interviewees also suggest that these are formulated in correlation to Hayden White's archetypal narratives of Comedy and Satire, as opposed to Huntington and Senghaas' versions of civilizations constructed in modes of Romance and Tragedy.

Key words: civilizations, narratives, emplotment, Syria, modernization

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1 Introduction

The idea for this study originates from a discussion in a Damascus café in the summer of 2008. The discussion evolved around all the modern phenomena and influences I had observed during my eight-week stay as a tourist in Syria. I was surprised by all the discos, architecture, food in the grocery store, cafés, lifestyles, etc., which all struck me as so modern and typically Western. My friend looked at me bewildered and said, “Western? What do you mean? They are just modern”.

As it turned out, “the West”, by which I so closely identified myself traveling around Syria, did not really exist as a culturally enclosed unit in my friends perception of the world – in fact, it didn’t even exist as a concept it seemed. Nor did he really encapsulate “the Western civilization” as a political or economical object in his worldview – perhaps merely geographically. I asked him if he ever saw himself as belonging to a Muslim civilization. He didn’t. Rather, he thought the mere viewpoint of that question was strange. Suddenly I felt like the Emperor’s New Clothes. What if my Western identity, and everything that comes with it, is an imaginary construction? What if the Western civilization is just a western myth sustained in “the West”?

1.1 A new world of civilizations

In the aftermaths of the terrorist attacks 9/11 2001 and the subsequent “War on Terror”, an attractive way for scholars to understand these presumably new conflicts, has been to search for causes in the interactions between and within *civilizations*. In a globalizing and postcolonial world, civilizations, rather than states or empires, has since early 1990’s been recognized as a major dividing line between political, economical and social entities in the traditionally Western political science (O’Hagan 2007:19f). Thus, many attempts has been made in the last two decades – by liberalists, Marxists, realists as well as constructivists – to present structural level theories in order to explain the nature of these civilizations and their role in International Relations.¹ This field of research has since grown to such extent that one could easily talk about a “Civilization Paradigm” in political

¹ The new paradigm was euphemistically termed “The New World Order”. See Hans Köchler, *Democracy and the New World Order*. Studies in International Relations, XIX. Vienna: International Progress Organization, 1993.

science, where all these new theories that use civilization as a unit of analysis, fit.
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One of the most disputed theories on this subject has been Samuel Huntington's piece *The Clash of Civilizations*, which controversially claims that it is the incompatibility of cultural entities, such as the Islamic and the Western, that is the essential cause for geopolitical conflicts around the world today (Huntington 1996). Another theory, introduced by Dieter Senghaas in polemics with Huntington, instead points to the internal tensions *within* civilizations as the main root for struggle as the result of economic differentiation that follow modernization (Senghaas 2002). In this study, these two theories will represent two opposite poles within the civilization paradigm.

One of the most debated civilizations since this field of research flourished has undoubtedly been the Muslim. Whether clashing with the West or internally collapsing, the Middle East in particular has been the focal point for many of the international conflicts, and thus analyses, in the last couple of decades. War and civil strife has been part of nearly all the states' history during the last 30 years in the region. In addition, the Middle East has received a lot of interest, as well as interference, from the outside world in the contest of geopolitical control, natural resources, new markets, culture, etc.

In this sense, "the Muslim civilization" has been viewed as a most problematic part of the world, at the same time essential to the development and stability of civilizations elsewhere. Studies within the civilization paradigm has thus tended to greatly homogenize the region as a singular unit with essentially the same problems and processes taking place, although varied in pace and expression.³ Its issues have accordingly been ascribed by theorists such as Huntington and Senghaas as the very crux of modernization and globalization – on the one hand exposed to rapid development along the lines of the Western civilization, on the other hand constituted by collective visions of reality fundamentally different from these "modern" influences.

Whether these divergences actually exist, and whether they in such case lead to tensions and conflict, is a most relevant question for the academic as well as the political world of today.

This minor field study will confront both theses by Huntington and Senghaas, commonly based in the analytical perspective of the "Civilization Paradigm", and on *qualitative grounds* examine how well they fit with thoughts and experiences actually expressed from within one of these "civilizations" – namely the Muslim. The research of the study is more specifically focused on the Syrian society and, within its context, aimed at empirically identifying and questioning the processes and manifestations suggested by the two theories on clashes between and within

² The term "Civilization Paradigm" was used by Huntington as early as 1993 (Huntington 1993). As pointed out by Hall and Jackson (2007) there has however been many different generations of civilization paradigms in political science before, where the present, post-essentialist, one counts as the fourth.

³ For one example of many in such an essentialist analysis, see John L Esposito's *Islam and democracy* (Esposito 1996).

civilizations. The empirical material for the study consists of a series of interviews with Syrians living in the vibrant city of Damascus.

1.2 Research problem and purpose of the study

One of the major differences between Huntington and Senghaas' theories on civilization clashes is in what way the clashes are expressed: either in disaffection towards the civilizations threatening to challenge cultural tradition (i.e. the "West"), or else towards the manifestation of new traditions when arising within one's own civilization (i.e. internal strife due to modernization).

Looking at major events in the Middle East during the last decade, both these notions can easily be supported by e.g. the terrorist attacks 9/11 2001 or the violent strife in Lebanon 2008 between government-supported militia and Hezbollah.

This being said, the validity of these analyses, where conflicts are paralleled with civilization clashes, is not unquestionable. What if, for instance, the people living within the contested civilizations themselves view these purported clashes differently? What if the suggested lines of conflict are merely part of a Western narrative not applicable to concepts of reality outside the industrialized countries in the West? What if the whole concept of civilizations is acknowledged only single-handedly?

Turning to the more specific case, Syria can be said to embody all the suggested ingredients of a clashing society within a Muslim civilization. The country is caught up in modernization processes penetrating both the economical and social spheres, at the same time sustaining traditional ways of life and strong religious beliefs. In addition, Syria is involved in the political as well as military conflicts going on in the region, where the omnipresent USA plays a leading part, in 2005 labeling the whole country as one of the terrorist states in the axis of evil (Krauthammer 2005). With such a favorable case to support the clash-theories expressed by Huntington and Senghaas, it would be interesting to investigate whether these notions bear any support or recognition within its community – whether there are any expressions of clashing civilizations inside the Syrian society.

Moreover, although based on fundamentally different perspectives – Huntington a culture essentialist while Senghaas a constructivist Marxist – these two theories however share a common analytical approach based on deductive research rather than empirical studies. The civilizations depicted in the works of Huntington and Senghaas are largely built upon interpretation and presumptions of historic developments, but does not take into account empirical evidence to support that these views are actually shared and acknowledged by the people constituting the civilizations described. In addition, although these theories are both highly influential and contested, there have been few attempts by other scholars to empirically test whether there exists deep cultural and/or materialist

divergences in-between or within civilizations such as the Muslim and the Western.⁴

This field study will try to fill this gap and complement the many macro-level analyses on civilizations with a micro-level case study based on seven semi-structured interviews. It aims at empirically testing the theses by Huntington and Senghaas, and on qualitative grounds confront them with an alternative, non-Western, narrative along the lines of Hayden White's theory on emplotment and meta-history. In line with this issue, the study can be further divided into a number of underlying research questions:

- Does the idea of a Muslim and/or Western civilization bear any recognition in the worldviews of people living in Syria?
- How do men and women in Syria identify themselves in relation to the rest of the world and what do they see as the greatest challenges, fault lines and prospects of their culture, religion and society?
- Does the narratives rendered from the empirical data point toward any clashes between or within civilizations?

1.3 Limitations of the study

To limit the theoretical framework of the study I have narrowed the wide field of the civilization paradigm to be represented by the two theories by Huntington and Senghaas. The study will naturally present merely a snapshot of the research questions stated above, based on the notion that a culture essentialist perspective with a holistic approach can only be further limiting and misleading. Rather, the scientific onset in this essay view civilizations, cultures and people as greatly heterogeneous and subjective things. With a snapshot such as this, it is however still possible to either defy or verify the applicability and suggested tendencies of the civilization paradigm. At the least, the study will give acknowledgement to one of many experiences just as valid as the ones of prominent scholars. In other words, it is not a study that questions the structural frameworks in the theories tested, but a study that investigates to what degree these structural theories corresponds to views of the actors within the civilization at hand.

In conducting a series of qualitative interviews from different layers of the Syrian society in Damascus, I hope to be able to contribute to the general field of research around the civilization paradigm, and to deepen the understanding of how the perception of civilizational entities functions outside the West. By giving room to the voices of ordinary Syrian people, their views of their own lives and

⁴ For a quantitative study see Norris & Inglehart 2003.

perceptions of what is going on in their society, I hope to be able to identify or at least try the usefulness in the above-mentioned theories on clashing civilizations. I will pay particular attention to the intertwining and merging of modernity with traditional lines of thought. I.e: How people perceive modernizing processes and its effects on society and in what way these processes change people's lives and society as a whole.

2 Theory

The study will use a number of theoretical frameworks as tools in order to investigate these questions around clashing civilizations. First, I will present the historic background constituting the civilization paradigm itself, which has evolved notably in International Relations during the past two decades; here mainly represented by the works of Samuel Huntington and Dieter Senghaas. This is done to establish the notion that this new paradigm in political science bears support mainly in a Western tradition.

Secondly, Hayden White's theory is presented on how representation of historical and political events may well be understood as *narratives* based on the culture and context of the researcher. Central to this study is to deconstruct the narrative around the civilization paradigm, and to understand that this narrative (whether established in the West as well as elsewhere) in turn is supporting and reaffirming its own theories. To explain this, White's theories become very useful.

Thirdly, the alternative narrative this study will present, in contrast to the civilization paradigm, will be analyzed through a set of theories evolving around social constructionism, discourse analysis and Occidentalism.

2.1 The rise of the civilization paradigm

The concept of civilizations, seen as consistent and conformed entities, has its historical roots in two different traditions of thought originating from the 18th and 19th century Western Europe.

On the one hand, the Enlightenment movement fostered the idea of Europe as a civilization of evolutionary force, built upon the *Man of Reason* and moving towards the apex of development (Jackson 2006:46f). During the 1700's, a self-understanding arose within "The West" which saw itself as *the* singular civilization, put in contrast to barbarism and savagery, and as a model for all other societies to follow, based on the ideas of e.g. Voltaire and Rousseau (Köchler 2006:6).

On the other hand, this universalistic view of the Western civilization was later to be contested in the 19th century by the German romanticism. The romanticist's rethinking of the civilization was a cultural and intellectual reaction against the reason and objective values of the Enlightenment, which instead favored the subjectivity and expressions of pluralism and relativism (Wolff 1994:11). The romanticists did not however abandon the idea of a unified civilization, but saw the world as consisting of multiple civilizations rather than

one, defined out of its inhabitants, and without any Western ideal to which all should strive.

Moving forward in time, the most recent paradigm in civilization theory came to life in the wake of the Cold War, when a new era in world politics started to emerge. The bipolar system where two superpowers struggled for hegemony over ideology came to an end, and by the time the Berlin Wall fell, in 1989, liberalism, for some researchers, stood as the uncontested victor and defender of progress and democracy.⁵ However, conflicts in the world were not over just because the Iron Curtain was dismantled, and during the following decade a search for new ways of how to explain the world order began.

How, for instance, could one account for the extraordinary regional economic development in the autocratic states of East Asia, while the entire Middle East region, with its rich supply of raw materials, was still struggling with regressive regimes and underdevelopment? During the second half of the 20th century all international conflicts had been aligned in order to fit the struggle between capitalism and communism, but with the end of the Cold War these conflicts were now able to blossom and express tensions not previously visible. For many researchers, as well as politicians, the “civilization” thus became important as an analytical unit and a base for international relations in order to categorize and structure the post-Cold War world.

It is out of these, rather Western, perspectives that Huntington and Senghaas build their theories, and out of which they put “the West” in relation to “the Rest”: Huntington representing an Enlightenment perspective whereas Senghaas derives his theory from a Romanticist tradition.

2.1.1 Huntington

Among the most notable of civilization theories, Samuel P. Huntington in 1993 presented his article “the Clash of Civilizations”, which was seen as a controversial and provocative theory based on the cultural essentialist notion that: “In the new world, the most pervasive, important and dangerous conflicts will not be between social classes, rich and poor, or other economically defined groups, but between people belonging to different cultural entities. Tribal wars and ethnic conflicts will occur within civilizations [...] and the most dangerous cultural conflicts are those along the fault lines between civilizations” (Huntington 1996:28). Specifically, Huntington emphasized that the Western and the Muslim civilizations were on a colliding course based on fundamentally different cultural values and worldviews.

⁵ Dramatically – and perhaps prematurely – expressed by Francis Fukuyama as the end of history: “What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.” (Fukuyama 1992).

Huntington bases his notion on civilization entities on the idea of *culture* and *religion* as significantly important concepts for how identities are shaped and maintained. The theory posits that culture and religion in fact constitute the essential building blocks of the civilization concept, which in turn outline the foundation for distinctly different categories of populations (Huntington 1996:42).

The civilization identity, according to Huntington, is the outermost level of a series of different identities a person can possess. He emphasizes that, even though all the different *levels of identity* are undoubtedly real, they are also social constructions influenced by several contextual circumstances that affect the balance between the various, sometimes competing, identities. As an example, he considers the Italian living in Rome: on one level this man may identify himself as a citizen of Rome, on a broader level perhaps as Italian, Catholic, Christian or European, and finally, in the widest scope, as a Westerner (Huntington 1996:43). Huntington nonetheless argues that individuals, more and more, primarily identify themselves by means of civilizations, and that this self-image constantly gets reaffirmed due to globalization processes where senses of locality, spatially and temporally, shrink (Huntington 1996:67-68).

In this sense, Huntington's theory is essentially different from a discourse analytical perspective. The construction of identities is seen as a process of defining opposite identities, i.e. "the other", where material grounds for identification are abolished (Bergström & Boréus 2005:327f.). In analogy to this notion, Huntington thus establishes that there is an inevitable clash between the Western and the Muslim civilizations.

2.1.2 Senghaas

Huntington has been widely criticized for his ideas and many scholars have since the publication of his article contested the theory and contributed to the debate with differing viewpoints and conclusions (e.g. Russett, O'Neal and Cox 2000; Chirot 2001; Fox 2001; Henderson and Tucker 2001). Among these critics, Dieter Senghaas in 2002 published the book *The Clash within Civilizations*, providing an alternative theory in which he claims that the real crux of today's conflicts lay *within* civilizations rather than between them. Senghaas build this onset on the notion that civilizations are not static but instead constantly challenged and transformed by forces from within. Senghaas argues that when different schools of thought evolve, when modern influences confront traditional concepts and norms, conflicts arise within civilizations. Modernization leads to tension, which manifests itself in various ways that can be seen all over the world – from the collapse of the Roman Empire to the struggles of the USSR.

In polemics to Huntington's reductionist picture of conflicting civilizations, Senghaas thus draws an alternative theory, which nonetheless bases its foundation on the civilization entity.

Senghaas however introduce a much more complex and contradictory analysis of how civilizations are shaped; notably in a much more heterogeneous and fragile creation that easily gets exposed to inner tensions and struggles. In contrast to

Huntington, the theory also posits that these inner conflicts primarily rest on socioeconomic ground rather than geo-cultural, which Senghaas sees as a natural consequence of the modernization processes that different parts of the world – although by varying degree, during different time spans and handled in different ways – are exposed to.

The basis for Senghaas argument partly spring from a Marxist perspective that perceives modernization as a fundamentally material development that moves towards increased *economical differentiation*. This economical differentiation is built up over time by gradually introducing new preconditions in the production system and its productive forces. Inevitably, both the producing and consuming markets thus change, which then give rise to tension, which in turn take on social and cultural undertones that lead to conflicts.

Just like Huntington, Senghaas thus use the concept of “civilization” as a unit of analysis, but at the same time contests the notion that these units are solely cultural entities that consists of homogenous and easily identifiable phenomenon (Senghaas 2002:2). Instead, Senghaas chooses to confront the civilization entity from a constructivist approach which, according to Colin Hay in his work on political science theory, emphasizes the complex interaction between both materialistic and idealistic factors rather than to choose one of these as ground for how to study the world (Hay 2002:208).

Senghaas distinguish “Modernization”, more than anything else, as a stage in history that confronts societies on both cultural and material levels. On one hand, Senghaas describes “Modernization” as development towards a more and more pluralistic society that challenges established and monopolitical traditions of thought. On the other hand, this development also leads to a more and more differentiated economy and diversified organization of labor. Thus, in the words of Senghaas, ”modernization is an uneasy, conflict-laden process because it questions the traditional basis of economic reproduction and patterns of social stratification, current collectivist value orientations and, consequently, traditional forms of rule” (Senghaas 2002:7f).

According to this theory, these modernization processes are at work all over the world, and from time to time, when the gap is too wide, bring such challenge to traditional societies that it inevitably leads to conflict. Senghaas maintains that this is what is happening in the Muslim civilization today.

2.1.3 Eurocentric narratives

The two however opposing theories by Huntington and Senghaas can also be seen as forming the joint theoretical framework of a narrative, which sees the fault line of today’s powers in the locus where tradition becomes confronted with modernization. In this common perspective, the processes of modernization constitute the driving forces for fundamental conflict because they inevitably follow developing lines at odds with former, traditional, powers.

Within this civilization narrative, tensions and conflicts are consequently lumped up in greater geographical areas such as the Middle East with the use of a

single concept – which is also used to help explain why development is so similar among different and autonomous states within the same regions. For both Huntington and Senghaas, these geographically bound civilizations are portrayed as units of either material structure, or ideological culture, with a strong sense of self-preservation; i.e. fighting back any advancement toward modernization that is in conflict with, or even threatening to influence, traditional organization of labor or schools of thought.

This discourse, in which these two general civilization narratives fit, could however be seen as closely linked to an essentially Western view of how the rest of the world is coping with development (White 1973:2f). From a Eurocentric perspective, “the West” is seen as qualitatively different from the rest of the world, making it easy to identify closed off civilization entities contrasting each other. In fact, the whole conception of an existing “West” inevitably requires for something else to exist in relation to its own civilization.

Irrespective of universal or pluralist views on development, both Huntington and Senghaas can in this respect be viewed as basing their notions on a traditionally Western norm for both what modernity entails and in what way globalization influences this process. This study will try to question this narrative with alternative stories from within Syria – a focal point of both modernization and globalization in progress.

2.2 Hayden White and the emplotment of history

To be able to further distinguish and contrast the theories on how the Muslim civilization is clashing, along with the alternative narrative presented by this minor field study, Hayden White’s theory on “emplotment” comes in handy. In *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Hayden White develops a philosophy of history in which he views historical representations as *stories* – culturally defined narratives – rather than objective and chronological facts of how history happened (White 1973; 1990).

With the concept of “emplotment”, White emphasizes that stories, annals, tales, narratives, are all necessary in order to give meaning to history; in fact necessary for us to at all be able to grasp any representation of what we perceive as reality (White 1990:54). To comprehend historical events, the stories need to be told in a language we understand, and by a narrative to which we can refer. Researchers such as Huntington and Senghaas, says White, therefore inevitably add *plots* to the phenomena they try to depict, when there in fact are no such plots ready and available in reality.

By “historical imagination” and narrative strategies of literature, history is thus filtered through an *emplotment*, according to White, which essentially needs dismantling in order for its underlying argumentation and ideology to be uncovered (White 1973:2). In this sense, White establishes the notion of “meta-history”, or histories about history.

Within an historical episode – e.g. the rise and fall of the USSR – there are endless numbers of facts – or data points – such as dates, names, wars, artifacts, etc; all more or less meaningful to understand its historical development. White’s point however, is that by navigating across these different data points – by cherry-picking them and by tying them together – historians and researchers add additional meaning to the general plot which then starts to unfold itself.

This notion becomes extra evident when scrutinizing the contested theories by Huntington and Senghaas where we have two works depicting the same historical account – the evolvement of civilizations – however represented in fundamentally different stories.

I will use White’s theory to deepen the understanding of why these narratives may, or may not, be compatible with the worldviews of people living outside the West. By structuring the narratives in different categories of emplotment, I hope to shed light on how *ideology* plays a leading part in the construction of civilization histories.

2.2.1 Another civilization theory – Tragedy or Comedy?

But where, one might ask, do these stories and narratives come from if not laying hidden in the historical events themselves or within the data points? The different plots of how the Soviet Union came to collapse, for instance, or how the Muslim civilization is going to clash for that sake, are not – regardless of the insights of Bob Dylan – just blowing in the wind. Rather, White’s point is that the plots in fact can be seen as the cultural foundations that constitute *civilizations* (White 1973:2).

According to White, civilizations can be said to emerge out of the types of stories common to the tradition of narration. The Western civilization is thus founded in its use of language, by the telling of stories, as a way of establishing concepts of reality – or in other words, made out of standard sets of myths (White 1973:8f). These myths, in turn, White traces back to a deeper anthropological understanding, which, just like language itself, transcends our conscious interpretation and follows cultural tradition (White 1973:15).

For the Western civilization, there are in essence four different standard myths, or types of emplotment, that can be traced back to classic Greek poetic theory. In line with Aristotle, White points to the four archetypes of Western canon in *tragedy*, *romance*, *satire* and *comedy* (White 1973:28). In one way or another, White means, these four traditions of fiction are closely linked to the ways in which the Western civilization is able to express its visions of reality. In that sense, they can also be said to constitute the standard forms of myths that emplotments of history can be filtered through. If not cast in these standard myths, histories will not be acknowledged by the Western civilization. Consequently, Western narratives will not be acknowledged by other civilizations, unless of course some form of cultural exchange and mutual understanding takes place.

As shown in the table below, White further claims that these standard forms of *Emplotments*, in turn becomes highly influenced and connected with both *Ideology* and different *Modes of Argument*.⁶

Table 1

<i>Mode of Emplotment</i>	<i>Mode of Argument</i>	<i>Mode of Ideology</i>
Romantic	Formist (or idiographic)	Anarchist
Tragic	Mechanistic	Radical
Comic	Organicist	Conservative
Satirical	Contextualist	Liberal

These four emplotments, combined with the four modes of argument, all have different ways of describing conflicts. The conflicts are seen as either static or flexible; either they need to be conquered or need to be integrated and negotiated. By so, the narratives ultimately also express different modes of ideology that either see clashes, (r)evolutions or cooperation as likely outcomes of these conflicts. Perhaps *all* of these perspectives are just as relevant, but with White’s theory we can deepen our understanding of the logic of these theories in international relations (rather than to replace them) and critically discuss them without having to discuss their validity or truth-content (Hall 2006:181).

White’s theory also suggests that how we put ourselves in relation to the rest of the world, how we define our identity, derives from these types of narratives. Depending on which type of emplotment we (perhaps subconsciously) use to

⁶ White emphasizes that although these correlations between the modes of emplotment, argument and ideology are perhaps the most likely, any other combinations might be relevant and there might as well be narratives written in e.g. romantic organicist liberal modes (White 1973:29f). The different modes of *Argument* refer to how much emphasis the story lays on different historical “units” (i.e. the importance of structures, agents, individuals, etc.) and how these are related to each other and to larger wholes (White 1973:13f). The *formist* mode of argument sees individual agents or entities as relatively independent and self-contained historical units. The *mechanistic* mode of argument rather looks for causal laws that determine the outcomes of historical phenomena in a reductive sense, minimizing the importance of individual actors. The *organicist* mode of argument argues that individual entities are components of processes, which aggregate into wholes greater than the sum of their parts – a form of synthesization between individual agents and structural principles. The *contextualist* mode sees all historical units as simultaneously influencing each other against a common background or frame of reference, making both structural powers and individual choices matter (White 1973:13-19).

With these modes of argument the historical account can then be depicted in the standard myths of: *Romance*, where a faithful hero is confronted by the adversities of the world but in the end prevails and finally liberates himself from the hardship; *Satire*, the opposite of the Romantic redemption, where man is captive of the world rather than its master, and where in the end “human consciousness and will are always inadequate to the task of overcoming the dark force of death, which is man’s unremitting enemy” (White 1973:9); *Comedy*, which White puts in between Romance and Satire, emphasizes reconciliation. In Comedy, there is hope of victory, which however never fully occurs, and instead you learn to accept the situation since the initially conflicting forces in fact shows themselves able to harmonize. In *Tragedy*, in which the conflicting forces are inflexible, you ultimately face resignation in front of the eternal struggles to which you need to adjust (White 1973:7-10).

make sense of history, that specific narrative will also influence the way we see our own place in the world.

2.3 Balancing constructed identities

To unravel the Syrian narratives represented by the interviews conducted in this study, and in turn put them in relation to the Western emplotments presented by Huntington and Senghaas, a discourse analysis will be used within the field of social constructionism.

Social constructionism is based on a critical analysis that tries to deconstruct and unmask what is perceived as normatively given or objectively true (Wenneberg 2001:10). The unit of analysis in social constructionism is much focused on text in its broadest sense, since language itself is seen as a social construction. By that, our perception and knowledge about “reality” – i.e. how we use language to describe our world – can also be analyzed in terms of a social construction. In other words, what we portray as reality is in social constructionism understood as a discourse product of how we categorize and make sense of the world. This perspective constitutes the epistemological underpinning of how the material in this study will be analyzed.

Rather than static objects, our worldviews and identities are thus subjective compositions made out of social contexts, such as history and culture. Thereby, no worldview or identity is more natural or more correct than any other (Winther & Phillips 2000:11). However, one of the main objects of social constructionism is to expose the power mechanisms that influence and control these ways in which we perceive the world. Since the social context out of which we build our identity is not fixed, the power over discourse also means the power to constitute reality, and ultimately the power of setting a political agenda. In that sense, social constructionists would argue, by reinserting “civilization” into our vocabulary the way Huntington and other researchers has done over the last decades, the discourse has changed, research in International Relations has changed, and consequently, our worldviews has changed.

Since identities are formed in relation to a social context, collective and political identities tend to be strengthened when contrasted to something that is essentially different.⁷ This constitutes a fundamental part in the construction of identities and implies that the definition of “us” also make it clear who “the others” are (Hall 2003:115).

In that sense, concepts such as “the West” or “the Muslim” are not subject to one singular and unambiguous signification. Rather, they are fluid and paradoxical, and their meaning constructed in the specific discourse where they are being used (Tängerstad 2000:161). Civilizations and civilizational identities

⁷ In present time, this may have been most visible during the Cold War where a communist identity stood in sharp contrast to a liberal identity.

can in this way be seen as social constructions, constantly redefined and challenged through social relations. Thereby, the discourses are not merely representations of reality, but also themselves constructing reality (Hall 2003:118).

However, just because we build our own identities on definitions of “the others”, these constructed notions are not necessarily mutually acknowledged in other contexts. Undoubtedly, our self-image is not identically reproduced by everyone around us. One of the main points of this study is that in order to better understand and describe the world, one has to create an understanding of how identities outside one’s own discourse are being created. In other words, how the notion of “us” and “them” is constructed outside “the West”, and where “we” fit in that vision of reality. I believe that this can be done by cultural exchange and mutual understanding of one another’s use of narratives.

3 Method

In correlation to social constructionism, the method of this analysis takes its stance in a discourse theoretical perspective represented by the researchers Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. This analytical scope “rejects the distinction between discursive and non-discursive practices”, and sees discourses as comprised not only by texts, but also by the social contexts from which they arise (Laclau & Mouffe 2001:107). The aim of the perspective is thus to locate the social practices (in texts, social phenomena, histories, etc.) where cultural signification is expressed (Jørgensen & Phillips 1999:31). The method further seek to identify the *discursive battles* that take place between and within the discourses, where different cultural and social significations are trying to win *hegemony* by out-conquering *antagonist* identities (Laclau & Mouffe 2001:114).

Laclau and Mouffe see the discourse analytical approach as a package solution where theory and method are closely intertwined (Jørgensen & Phillips 1999:10). At the same time, the approach allows for individual “packaging”, where a mixture of different discourse analytical perspectives, as well as non-discursive theories, is seen as beneficial.

In such a discourse analysis, there are no predefined models for how the research should be conducted. Rather, it is up to each researcher to elaborate the analytical models they see fit for the specific study at hand (Bergström & Boréus 2005:329).

The empirical material in this study will be based on a series of semi-structured interviews. Steinar Kvale argues that the qualitative research interview is a potent method when trying to pinpoint the mindsets, perceptions and worldviews that members of a community express (Kvale 1997:100). The qualitative interview is characterized by open questions where the interviewee’s own thoughts, motives and opinions play a significant part. The answers can also play an interactive part in how the interviews elapse and what follow-up question may pop up.

The purpose of the interviews is to convey the discourse of which the interviewees are an intrinsic part. Thereby, not only *what* is said in the interviews matter, but also *how* things are said and how they are communicated. Such information is difficult to interpret without physical contact and would not be possible to intercept in a quantitative study.

Obviously, trying to capture cultural ideas and discourses entails several challenges to the researcher. Precision and transparency therefore becomes extra important throughout the process. In order to obtain that, exact quotations will be used from the empirical material throughout the study and my own interpretations and analyses will be as explicative as possible to increase inter-subjectivity. However, I do not believe that a fully objective and distanced perspective is

possible for such a study. Thus, by acknowledging the fact that, as a middleclass Swedish male researcher, my own cultural discourse derives from a Western social context, full of biased ideas on the world; and by acknowledging that my own perception of reality is based in the very same narrative references that the study is trying to question; I will endorse that subjectivity and, in line with the critical analysis of Huntington and Senghaas, try to challenge my own preconceived ideas on a world divided by the West and the Rest.

3.1 The interviewees

The empirical material consists of seven separate interviews with men and women living in Damascus, Syria. The interviews were conducted 14–23 June 2008 and lasted for 60 to 90 minutes each.

In my selection of interviewees, I have made some analytical decisions regarding the diversity and composition of the group. Following Kvale in his notion that diversified accounts are important to render nuanced images of a complex reality, the interviewees were chosen based on different operational criteria that would differentiate social and economical background (Kvale 1997:36).

When starting out the research, my initial idea was to select half the interviewees from people that could be identified as “traditional”, and the other half from people identified as “modern” (i.e. “modern” as in individuals who fit the ideal type of Huntington’s notion of a Western value profile, or who endorsed the school of thought identified by Senghaas as modern and challenging). This approach however proved to be difficult – rather reflecting my own prejudices about the composition of the “Muslim society” – since, in reality, everyone I came in contact with naturally expressed elements of both modernity and tradition simultaneously.

Consequently, I had to limit the group of interviewees in another way, since the selection otherwise would have been too random – and thereby would have made the study much harder to reproduce and the analysis much more difficult to generalize. Thus, the selection of interviewees was instead focused on a group of people whom I identified as most likely to be situated *in-between* modernity and tradition: namely young adults. Based on the theoretical definitions by Huntington and Senghaas, a segment of young adults was chosen to be most likely to intersect with modernization processes in a society. In other words, men and women in their twenties and thirties who are exposed to influences from both modernity and tradition, exposed to potential conflicts between reform and conservatism, and forced to navigate across identities of new and past cultures. I concluded that among 25 to 35-year olds it is most likely to find both types of conflicts suggested by Huntington and Senghaas, as well as both sides of that conflict.

Moreover, to render a social and economical diversity within that segment the interviewees were selected based on a differentiation between sex, education and occupation. These four criteria are rather easy to classify and control, and will to

some extent reflect diversities also regarding class, gender and background. Although not representative for the entire Syrian community, or Damascus even, such a qualitative selection will at least provide the empirical data with different points of views from different locations in society; i.e. contrast and heterogeneity. The aim of the study is partly to question Huntington's *uniform view* of the Muslim civilization, and partly to challenge Senghaas' *antagonistic view* between different traditions of thought within that Muslim civilization. By choosing interviewees from different layers of the Syrian community, I hope to be able to address both these notions simultaneously.

In addition, although a bit more complicated to control, I have tried to attain some divergence regarding religious beliefs among the interviewees. Five of the interviewees said they were Muslim. Out of these, two practiced a more liberal version of Islam than the others – among other things they did not go to the mosque every week, they did not pray five times per day and they sometimes drank alcohol. The sixth interviewee did not want to confess to Islam and rather defined his own religious beliefs. The seventh interviewee was Christian.

Based on this selection process, the seven interviewed individuals who take part in this study are Sami, Majed, Nora, Shaza, Abdurahman, Aouss, and Sameh. Sami was my landlord during my stay in Damascus. He put me in contact with Majed and Nora. In other words a classical case of the snowball effect (Denscombe 2000). Through social interaction with other people I stumbled upon in Damascus, I came in contact with the other interviewees. Except for Sami, Majed and Nora, the interviewees did not know each other from before and did not belong to the same social context.

3.2 The interviews

The interviews followed a semi-structured model, outlined with the use of an interview-guide with predefined themes and questions (Kvale 1997:121). The interview guide shows how different types of questions are linked to different themes throughout the interview (see Appendix 1). These themes evolved around key components of the research questions, such as the relationship between religion and modernity; tensions within one's community; conflicting identities; etc. Single questions could give answers concerning multiple themes depending on what the interviewees choose to focus their answers on, and due to overlapping themes. By keeping the theory and general research question in mind, answers were interpreted in line with the discourse analysis and follow-up questions asked in order to fit the social constructionist perspective of the study.

The interviews were based on open-ended questions where the informants were free to elaborate and asked to give feedback on how they understood the questions. Open-ended questions have the advantage that the researcher cannot expect a specific answer or result from the interview and thereby maintains open and sensitive to variation in the response (Dexter 2006:4).

Before each interview, the interviewee was informed that the general theme of the study concerned perceptions of modernization, globalization and civilizations, and possible tensions therein. They were also informed that the interviews were anonymous and that the results would be published at a Swedish university for political science. They were also made aware that the interview was not a personal assessment and that there were no "right" or "wrong" answers.

All of the interviewees had Arabic as mother tongue, but could at least speak English on an elementary level. Four of the interviews were conducted in the presence of an interpreter who translated between Arabic and English. In the other three interviews, English language skills were deemed good enough for the interviewees to express their minds and hearts satisfactory. Nevertheless, the fact that all the interviews were conducted either through a translator or in a foreign language makes the reliability somewhat weakened. To counter that, many follow-up questions were asked repeatedly on the different themes in order to get as many aspects and angles as possible.

4 Deconstructing civilizational narratives

The following section will present the results from the interviews, which will be consecutively analyzed in relation to the theoretical framework stated above. The analysis will be structured in the same general themes that was used in the interview guide (see Appendix 1), divided into sections concerning: constructed identities; changes in the Syrian society; tensions within the Syrian society; tensions between the Syrian/Muslim society and the West; relations between religion, tradition and modernity; and lastly conceptions of democracy.

Within these sections, the overall theme of the analysis will continuously try to close in on the underlying research questions of how the interviewees identify themselves in relation to the rest of the world and what they see as the greatest challenges, fault lines and prospects of their culture, religion and society, and in what way these results point toward any recognition of a clashing Muslim or Western civilization. Hayden White's notion of narrative emplotments will be used as a theoretical guide in this analysis in order to put the narratives of the interviewees in relation to the narratives by Huntington and Senghaas.

4.1 Dealing with identities

No, I don't see myself as a Muslim, but sometimes because my identity is Muslim, I feel obligated to act like someone who is Muslim. I feel more Arab than Muslim, but sometimes I don't see myself as Arabic. It is very complicated. Sometimes I just feel different, sometimes my mentality feels more similar to Europe even, but because I live here in Syria, I feel like both. [...] I feel different from most other Syrians. (Interview with Majed, 2008-06-18).

Coming to terms with one's identity is not an easy task. Just like Patrik Hall points out we all tend to identify ourselves by multiple and simultaneously acting identities, which are relationally constructed and reconstructed in the interaction between human beings (Hall 2003:115). Identities are not fixed or built on top of a solid core that defines some innate and governing identity. Rather identities are sometimes contradictory and need constant feedback and confirmation from different places in order to sustain (Neumann 2003:110f).

The sentiment expressed by Majed in the quote above clearly illustrates this notion. He recognize the expected identification with a Muslim community, he

understands that he belongs to a social context in which he is an intrinsic part. However, this does not stop him from enacting other identities as well, which simultaneously blend and create that special feeling of being a unique, or a “different”, self rather than just embodying the predefined versions of an Arab or Muslim identity.

This perspective on identity was also the dominating response from all the other interviewees. They all expressed contradictory and conflicting senses of identification, where an identity sometimes could be limiting and other times powering. On the one hand, they related to their Syrian identity in terms of cultural and social heritage, on the other hand they all showed a rather strong discontent towards a Syrian nationalism in terms of loyalty with the Syrian state. On the one hand, they related to a Muslim (or Christian) identity by the social norms constituted by their own society, on the other hand they seemed well conscious about other sides of this identity, relating to the Muslim stereotype narrated by Huntington for instance, outside their own society. In this sense, just as Antony Giddens suggest, it is impossible to talk about identity in International Relations “without looking at the complex of interaction between the social and the psychological and the political at different levels”. (Farrands 1996:5). For the interviewees this was expressed as a constant negotiating between different dynamic narratives, internal *and* external, of what it entails to belong to different archetypical identities. Perhaps best expressed by Nora in this vigorous quote:

I feel connected and belonging to the Syrian culture, but sometimes I feel so attached to this culture and country, that it is hard to develop myself continuously. But this is normal in any society, feeling limited by the norms. Maybe you don't like the traditions you see, but you respect them. For example, the Syrian girls don't go with other men in cars because the society limits them in that way. (Nora 2008-06-20).

In addition, no one of the interviewees could give a definite answer on whether they embodied a dominating identity stronger than any of their other identities. Rather, most of the interviewees made reservation against the idea of confessing to any such essentialist identity, or like Sami said: “I don't know how faithful I am to my religion, but I don't see myself as a Muslim really, I see myself as Sami.” (2008-06-17). When asked if he identified himself with Arabs in other countries such as Egypt and Lebanon, Sami shrewdly said he could not think in such terms of a Arab unity from the outside the way I did, since he by default was viewing this concept of unity from the inside. Even so, he did not put any more weight in the solidarity between Arabs than any other sense of kinship. Quite the opposite, he as well emphasized the feeling of multiple identities and when asked whether he ever identified with people from “the West” he answered:

You can be all this, what you want, whenever you want. If I go to France and want to be French in some ways, I do that. Even here, I am sometimes western. It's no problem, on the contrary, I am

attracted to multiple identities. [...] I don't feel I have to change myself to incorporate a Western identity, I still belong to this [Arabic] unity at the same time. (2008-06-17).

In this sense Sami, as well of the other interviewees, express a rather conscious understanding of the idea of a Muslim, Arabic, Syrian or Western identity, based on the Huntingtonian notion of civilizational identities, but contest any sentiment that these identities would be singular or hierarchical. Their self-understanding, in terms of White's theory, rather point towards a *contextualist* mode of argument where structural powers and individual choices equally intertwine and constantly form sets of reconstructed identities (White 1973:18f).

Huntington on the other hand, follow a more *formist* mode of argument in his argument that cultures, and individuals are rather isolated and static objects constituted by fixed *levels of identity* (White 1973:13, Huntington 1996:43). Huntington never questions the existence of the civilization identity as the outermost level in the enclosed cultural sphere that defines each civilization (Huntington 1996:41f). In other words, he chooses to exclude any discussion around the possibility for change or redistribution of contents in the civilization identity, much in favor for the durable role of religion (Huntington 1996:305). By that, Huntington's view on civilizational identity follow a typically *romantic* narrative that choose to see Islam as the foundation for a common belief system which is so deeply rooted that any challenge to this paradigm poses a *threat* to the civilization, rather than a dynamic evolvement of its existence.

Needless to say, the visions of reality communicated by the interviewees were a bit more contradictory than this. Aouss, for instance, who said he simultaneously identified himself as Arabic, Christian and Syrian would have a hard time fitting in any of Huntington's civilization identities. Nonetheless, he also expressed that once religious identity is becoming an issue, that issue surely poses a threat to society as a whole:

In some subjects I consider myself Arab, in others I don't: For instance that we have an old culture that never meet with other cultures. We are a country of the Muslim religion, and sometimes we have a problem with this. Other countries don't ask what religion you belong to, but here we care much about this and ask what religion do you belong to. This is not a problem directly to me, but I can see that this is a problem to our society. (Aouss 2008-06-22).

4.1.1 Identities of modernity and tradition

Besides culture and religion, another aspect of identity that concerns Senghaas theory on clashing civilizations is the one regarding incompatibility between modernity and tradition. Distancing himself from classical Marxism, Senghaas claim that conflicts within civilizations are not solely a manifestation of dialectical materialism, but just as much an expression of ideological change

based on modernization. In line with the characteristics of modernization-processes in general, he points at a modernistic tendency where pluralism and modern “value-profiles” on a idealistic level work parallel to the economical changes, and which in his perspective influence the material structure just as much as the other way around (Senghaas 2002:74f). Thereby, one way these clashes within society would inevitably express themselves, is between modern and traditional “value-profiles”; i.e. identifying with either modern or traditional schools of thought while experiencing some kind of contradiction between the two (Borgström & Goldstein-Kayaga 2006:216f). However, neither this dialectical sentiment would clearly show itself in the conducted interviews. Rather the interviewees, once again, identified themselves as enacting both modern and traditional lines of thought simultaneously:

I feel both modern and traditional at the same time. In a way I feel traditional, for instance in dealing with romance. In other ways I feel modern. [...] I don't feel western – modern, but not western. [...] By western in general I mean industrialization, modernization and technology. In the West they know how to deal with technology. Here in Syria, nobody knows how to use technology and take advantage of it in productive ways. [...] Culturally, we have the same culture as Europe; our culture, our heroes, our stories, are all the same and connected to each other. (Sameh 2008-06-22).

Sameh seems to have different ideas of what is modern, where culture and social life is not necessarily connected or dependent on materialistic modernity. He sees himself as traditional in terms of family-life, but modern in terms of his views on the production system, economy, education, etc. This dual identification with a modern and a traditional side does not however seem to conflict.

4.2 Change and modernization – where does it all come from?

In Syria we like modern changes. We like influences wherever they come from. The Arabs has always liked progress in that way. (Sami, 2008-06-20).

One of the main arguments in the theories by Huntington and Senghaas is that civilizational conflicts arise when societies are exposed to different stages in modernization and globalization, which they are not susceptible to. The issues of the Muslim civilization can thus be explained by exposure of rapid development along the lines of Western civilization, while the Muslim society at the same time is constituted by collective visions of reality or regulation of institutional life, fundamentally different from these “modern” influences. The major differences

between Huntington's and Senghaas' theories are in what way the conflicts in turn express themselves: either in disaffection towards the civilizations threatening to challenge cultural tradition (i.e. the "West"), or else towards the manifestation of new traditions when arising within one's own civilization (i.e. internal strife due to modernization). Consequently, a major topic in the interviews of this study has been focused on the ways in which the Syrian society is modernizing, how it is changing, and where these changes come from.

When analyzing the material from the interviews, two different themes in regards to modernization were distinguished: social and economical modernization. Within these two themes, the interviewees all expressed a notion that there were two different types of modernization taking place simultaneously in society: one essential modernization, bringing on real and lasting change mainly seen as positive, and one artificial modernization, which was seen as superficial and mainly grotesque.

Regarding the first theme on social modernization, this topic evolved much around the social norms between men and women and inequality. Nora and Shaza, the two women in the study, focused a great deal of their responses on the liberation and independence of women as the most present and urgent issue for them in the Syrian society. In their eyes, a typically essential modern influence was the increased possibilities for women to socialize more freely with men, without being restricted by traditional social norms and feeling limited in the public sphere.

I see myself as modern. I speak with a lot of people, so I feel free that I can be social with many people, which traditionally is not very easy for women here in Syria. (Shaza 2008-06-22).

I feel limited by tradition, for instance when I try to express love towards a boyfriend; it can't be done publicly. Here in Syria, I feel shy, but I don't think I would in other countries in Europe for instance. [...] I feel modern when traveling by myself. To me, modernity is about independence, for instance also when I go home by myself late at night. (Nora 2008-06-20).

In this sense, both Shaza and Nora give words to a social modernization, which they see as positive. All of the other interviewees touched upon this subject as well; like Aouss who declared that "to have a girlfriend is modern", or like Abdurahman who said that "today, a modern change is that young men and women fight to marry who they want, when they want".

However, closely related to this change in social liberation, most of the interviewees also expressed concerns about another socially modern phenomenon taking place in the relatively new bars and clubs downtown. More specifically the general sentiment among the interviewees was that the moral and sexual looseness that more and more young people were adopting during nightlife, was a good example of modernization gone bad:

If I go to a bar and fool around, you understand this in Europe. But here, people don't understand this and the society won't allow it. We think that European people jump from one girl to another, just having fun, and that you can sleep with anyone you want. We are wrong of course, so when we try to copy this behavior, it becomes an artificial and bad modern phenomenon. (Nora 2008-06-20).

Some things are bad that come from the West, like when men go with many women and are together in a bad way. Especially in Syria this happens in the bad, bad way, but it also exists in the west I think. (Shaza 2006-08-22).

The described trend among young Syrians of “fooling around”, may or may not be new, but evidently, this behavior seemed to be perceived by all the interviewees as something modern, something bad and something coming from a Western culture. At the same time, as Nora says in the quote above, this expression of a Syrian modernity is seen as something fundamentally superficial and corrupt. Additionally, even though the influence may be coming from a culture outside the Syrian society, Nora sees the modern phenomenon as essentially Syrian in its new context, rather than Western, since the perceived behavior is merely copied and reconstructed without enacting the cultural foundation from which it derives. In other words, Nora resent the way in which this Western influence is poorly incorporated into her society, rather than resenting the Western culture as such. This sentiment was also expressed by other interviewees, like Sameh who said that “in a way this [fooling around] is good, in a way it's bad. The modern social change is Western, and some of these changes go too fast. Sometimes we take the bad things from the west without thinking, and sometimes we take the good things and make them bad.” (2008-06-22).

What the interviewees express in these quotes are in other words a much more complex perspective of modernization processes than suggested by the Huntingtonian theory, which would rather choose to see a negative influence by western culture on the Muslim social tradition as an external threat rather than an internal synthesis. The duality and paradoxically in the social change, where two sides of sexual liberation is perceived as a both constructive and destructive modernization processes simultaneously, also contest the idea that social differentiation naturally evolve into dialectical tensions, as suggested by Senghaas.

The second theme in the interviews in regards of modernization, concerned economical change. As in the field of social modernization, here too the general sentiment among the interviewees was that some parts of the economical development in Syria was durable and positive, such as the expansion of the banking system, whereas other aspects of the modern economy was seen as cosmetic and destructive. Also, just as with the social change, it proved difficult to determine whether the economical modernization was coming from within the Syrian community or originated in influences brought on by the outside world.

Here, modernity is many times an individual vision. Versace in the stores for instance is modernity, but it is an individual modernity, only for appearance. [...] Capitalism is good in order to develop industries and make economy efficient. But the in-humane sides of it are very bad, where for instance three persons take all the wealth and the rest of the people live in poverty. (Nora 2008-06-20).

The government says “we are now open to the west”, you can buy coca-cola and Versace in the store. But who can afford this? No one! We now have a Syrian car – it cost 12.500 dollars. It is so expensive that everyone who needs a car import one instead. Minimum salary is 150 dollars per month.(Sameh 2008-06-22).

While Sameh saw the banking system in Syria as a very necessary modern institution for economical development, the same economical process which opened Syria to the Chinese market, also brought on changes which inevitably has led to consumer behaviors similar to any other globalized and capitalist society. Sameh’s point however was that in Syria, this development has been going so fast that the consumerism and economical lifestyles (or “individual modernity” as Nora calls it) has been outrunning the productive system, and thereby the individual economy has evolved merely apparent: “The national economy has not been as fast, so people take loans in order to afford all the new things they think they need to buy. People buy 3G-phones, but there is no 3G-system to call from.” (Sameh 2006-08-22).

By any standards, this narrative on modernization would surely be regarded as comic. Even in terms of Hayden White’s categorization of Western narratives, the accounts on how the interviewees depict the economical changes in Syria could very well be sorted as *Comedy*. By acknowledging the two-sided characteristics of the economical modernization, the general sentiment here is that reconciliation is possible; both in the internal conflict between the producing and consuming Syrian markets, and also in the external conflict between a global production system and a domestically rather isolated economy. Additionally, in relation to White’s different modes of argument, this view on reality would best fit in a *organicist* mode of argument which assert that individual entities are indeed components of processes, which aggregate into wholes greater than the sum of their parts – a form of synthesis between individual agents and structural principles (White 1973:16).

4.3 A clash within the Muslim civilization?

Syria has been forced to coop with modernization developments relatively quickly during the last century. The country has been faced with an economic differentiation brought from the outside world, having to adopt to the world capitalist system and way of structuring the society materially. At the same time

ideational influences has set root in Syria, giving rise to a pluralistic culture, different political ideologies and new ways of life. The question then is whether a clash within the Syrian society is taking place, and in such case in which ways it is being handled.

According to Senghaas, civilizations that encounter material and idealistic pluralistic development are bound to give rise to conflicts (Senghaas 2002:8). These conflicts can in turn be handled in different ways, which either leads to further modernization or continued conflict. Senghaas could thereby be said to position himself in a narrative tradition of *Tragedy*, in which the conflicting forces of a society is seen as inflexible and ultimately facing resignation in front of the eternal struggles by which you need to adjust (White 1973:10). Although based on a Marxist notion that it is economical differentiation (in Syria currently the inflicting of a global capitalism) that is the fundamental cause for these civilizational clashes, Senghaas however posits that these conflict as well take social and cultural overtones: “Religion gains momentum and becomes a rallying point, a resource in desperation only when promising life perspectives do not emerge otherwise. In the latter case, a distribution conflict tends to become a conflict of identity, but in its very core it still remains a conflict of distribution.” (Senghaas 2002:76). This sentiment was also shared by Nora when the interviews turned to questions of conflicts within the Syrian society:

The tensions from the countries around Syria like Lebanon and Iraq is also spreading to Syria, which is a big problem. And these problems cause problems also in social life and economical life. Because of this, it is difficult to believe in sustainable development. [...] Because of the limitations in free speech, people seek other ways to express themselves, for instance in religious extremisms, or money. Politics on the other hand become uninteresting. (Nora 2008-06-20).

In contrast to both theories by Huntington and Senghaas, none of the interviewees named Islam as a major cause for internal conflict in Syria. Neither did they perceive Islam as a unifying factor and common belief system for their society as a whole. Rather, the general perception of Syrian issues communicated by the interviewees was of a rather heterogeneous and diverse kind, mostly concerning the regressive regime in one way or another. Like Abdurahman said “the biggest reason for conflict is that we have only one dominating political party” (2008-06-22). The fact that the Syrian society is composed of a plurality of communities in regards of religion, culture, tradition as well as ideologies, did not however pose any significant cause for tension according to the interviewees. In the words of Majed:

Islam has to be traditional in many ways, but this is not the reason for conflict and tension. There are many reasons for fighting against modernization, but these are mainly because of political and

economical reasons. Not because of religion or culture. (Majed 2008-06-20).

In this perspective, political and economical factors are seen as independent systems of power, out of reach for both culture and religion. The sentiment expressed by Majed in regards of tensions within the Syrian society is, once again, that the political sphere is functioning along lines disassociated from the social and economical spheres, being a regressive regime that acts as it pleases, without concerns of conflict with other parts of society. In the same way, the economical system is seen as equally independent and unpredictable now that it has become encapsulated in the global capitalism. This narrative, in turn can be seen as a *Satirical* account on reality by the theory of White, where man is captive of the world rather than its master, and where in the end human consciousness and will are always inadequate to the task of overcoming the inevitable forces of external powers (White 1973:9).

As comparison, this view of conflicts within the Syrian society can be put in contrast to Huntington's culture essentialist notion following a *Romantic* narrative of unified struggle between religious entities as the outermost expression of any such pluralist threat by modernization.

4.4 Tensions between Syria and the West

This idea [of fundamental differences] doesn't exist to me, it's not meaningful to talk about difference. When you come here, you can be the same as the Syrian people. When you accept the other, you can live with them, without difference. The difference is the appearance. I can say to you "Ah, you have green eyes", that is difference. You can be different in Sweden, within your people. It is the same for me in Syria. I don't like to generalize about people, or countries, or the differences. It is absurd. Its like when you say "The English girls are cold, but the Spanish girls are hot", it's a difference, but it is absurd. (Sami 2008-06-18).

When addressing the question whether there exists any fundamental differences between Syria and the West, all of the interviewees were mutually assured that any such assertion could not be made easily. As Sami express in the quote above, the way in which he view the Syrian culture and society is much based in a anti-essentialist perspective formed in a *Contextualist* argument. By that, any grand generalization of differences between "the West" and himself, as he says, become absurd.

Nora, on the other hand, do see differences between her world and the Western, namely in the relationship between men and women. Along with Shaza and Aouss, she emphasize the ability of walking side by side with men other than husbands and relatives, and the possibility of moving to your own place when

turning 18 years old. At the same time, just as before, this positive difference with “the West” is also paired with a reservation for the dirty flip sides of the social changes intrinsic of modernization. Thus she remarks:

The word “value” has not the same meaning in different societies, to protect a woman is to limit her in Syria, while in Europe it perhaps means that you just want to protect her from limitations. On the relationship between men and women, in Europe women can walk side by side with men other than their husbands. But at the same time this maybe leads to more cheating and deception. (Nora 2008-06-20).

None of Nora, Shaza or Aouss however see any deeper incompatibilities between Syria and other countries in the West in regards of economy, culture or religion. The fact that a large part of Damascus is already defined by its Christian and Jewish heritage may very well contribute to this non-conflicting attitude – a diverse geo-cultural composition in city landscape that most places in the Western world are in lack of.

Additionally, a significant factor in the sense of feeling different from the Western part of the world – besides the lack of freedom of speech and democracy – correlated to the political situation in which Syria inevitably is an intrinsic part. The Middle East region is suffering from constant tension and violent strife, naturally affecting one’s vision of reality and perception of pragmatic truth. As Aouss said:

Maybe in the west people are fighting for their political ideas, for their personal economy. But here in Syria, we have so much more acute problems. We have border issues, armed enemies, wars. In Europe or America, you don’t think about war. You don’t think that in ten years there may be war in my country. But here, every month conflict does not break into war is a good month, but still you think it may come tomorrow. (Aouss 2008-06-22).

4.4.1 The existence of civilizations

As much as the issue on a clash between the Western and Muslim civilizations concern fundamental and essential differences in value-profiles, what is equally important to question in this study has been whether the notion of civilizations at all exists within the worldviews of the interviewees. Although based on fundamentally different perspectives, what Huntington and Senghaas however share with the rest of the Civilization Paradigm, is the division of the world in civilizational entities. This narrative however proved itself to bear little recognition within the worldviews of the interviewees, except for one aspect: freedom of speech and freedom of opinion:

When I think of Europe for instance, I don't think of a big unity. I think that each person has a personality; like, that one has a personality, that one has another personality. I think of "the West" as only a geographical area. And, also, freedom of opinion. (Sami 2008-06-17).

5 Conclusions

The clash between and within civilizations is a most urgent concept in regards to the Arab world today – on the one hand torn between modernization and reforms, and on the other hand revitalizing much of its tradition and heritage in terms of culture and religion. Traditional values and material conditions are inevitably confronted with new ideas as pluralism and economic differentiation evolves. In Syria in particular, these processes are evident.

At the same time, it is important to point to the heterogeneity of the Syrian society and its large amount of different experiences, for instance expressed and emphasized in the interviews of this study. Accordingly, the notion of a clash within or between the “Muslim Civilization” is not necessarily applicable turning to the subjective experience. Conducting a series of interviews with young men and women living in Damascus, the aim of this study has been to question the essentialist narrative in that the world consists of closed off and easily identifiable civilization units.

“By studying the myths it is possible to critically discuss international relations stories without having to discuss their validity or truth-content.” (Hall 2006:181).

By endorsing the theory on emplotment narratives by Hayden White, I have been able to show that the two theories by Huntington and Senghaas, as representatives of the Civilization Paradigm, plot their views on clashes in civilizations in the traditionally western forms of Romance and Tragedy. Additionally, I have shown that the visions of reality and the worldviews expressed in the interviews, in contrast point towards a completely different way of describing the effects of civilizational identity, modernization and conflict. From a Western perspective, these narratives were rather expressed in White’s archetypal emplotments of Comedy and Satire.

The interviewees did not seem to view the West as “the other” in such great extent as the Civilization Paradigm presumes. Rather, the conceptions of “the Western” as well as “the Muslim” civilization, seemed largely incoherent and heterogenic, influencing each other and evolving along both productive and destructive lines of modernization. In addition, since the interviewees perceived their cultural and social borders as much more engaged in global influences, they tended not to perceive different geographical areas as enclosed units, since they did not at all perceive their own country, religion, culture or identity as such. Contradictory identities on modern and traditional value-profiles additionally helped in forming a more open, and in a way more complex, view on reality, constructing an alternative narrative beyond civilizational identities.

The “Civilization” is a handy myth for categorizing the world into manageable units of analysis. Splitting the world into such identifiable entities of certain

characteristics makes it possible to create grand theories for how a globalized world functions at large. Such a division of the world is however bound to be rather generalizing and schematic. Undoubtedly, in order to set up the boundaries for specific civilizations, one has to adopt a philosophy of history that bases its progress on macro level structures rather than the actions of individual actors. The outlining of civilizations thus require general narratives that explain ones own position in the world in relation to others. The Western Civilization, for instance, has always been outlined in contrast to everything that lies outside of it (Federici 1995).

Therefore, the general organization of the world in categories of “civilizations” easily becomes exposed to rather biased ideas of mechanisms of power that may not be applicable in other contexts, and which perhaps overlook alternative analyses. In addition, creating a theory on how the rest of the world will evolve based on a western philosophy of history and narrative, becomes further paradoxical since “other” civilizations in turn base their own understanding and evolvement along lines concurrent to their own subjective perception of history and development.

In Syria, being a dictatorship, identity is not connected to politics in the same ways as in a democracy. Analyzing the responses from the interviewees, they seemed not to identify as much with the state and its foreign affairs, compared to myself coming from a consolidated democracy where state and nationalistic identity often go hand in hand. Everything with political underpinnings was rather seen as belonging to a different and unreachable world for the interviewees. Thereby, for instance, they could enact a worldview where American culture and American politics were not necessarily seen as intertwined, although coming from the same civilization. In the same way, social life and culture seemed to be functioning on separate levels within the Syrian society, apart from political and macro-economical assertions.

6 Appendix 1

6.1 Interview guide

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Age
- 1.2 Education
- 1.3 Occupation
- 1.4 Family status

2. Identity

- 2.1 Do you identify yourself as a muslim?
 - i. Do you practice Islam regularly?
- 2.2 Do you consider yourself Arab or typically Syrian or both or none (ethnicity)?
- 2.3 Do you identify with other people living in the Middle East (Egyptians, Lebanese, Iranian, etc)?
- 2.4 Do you think of yourself as modern or traditional or both?
- 2.5 Do you feel western in any way?
- 2.6 Do you identify more with Muslims living in Indonesia than with Christian Europeans?
- 2.7 Do you think of “the West” as a big unified whole?

3. Changes in society

- 3.1 Do you think Syria is changing and developing as a society or does it stand still (socially, politically and economically)?
- 3.2 What are the biggest changes taking place today?
- 3.3 What have been the biggest changes during the last 10 years?
- 3.4 In what way is Syria different from when your parents were young?
- 3.5 Are the changes for the better or the worse?
- 3.6 Why do you think these changes are happening?
- 3.7 Are the changes affecting your life in any way (positive/negative)?
- 3.8 What do you think will change in the future?
- 3.9 What is modern in Syria to you?
- 3.10 What is traditional in Syria to you?

4. Tensions within society

- 4.1 Are the changes causing tension or conflict within the Syrian society?

- 4.2 Are there other tensions in the Syrian society not caused by modernization (socially, politically and economically)?
- 4.3 Are the changes accepted by everybody even though they may not adopt them personally?
- 4.4 What is good/bad about the traditional values?
- 4.5 Are modern and traditional influences able to exist side by side without conflict?

5. Tensions between Syrian/Muslim society and the West

- 5.1 Are there any fundamental differences between Syria and “the West”?
- 5.2 In what way is Syria different from “the West”, socially, politically and economically?
- 5.3 Do you think you value other things than people living in “the West”?
- 5.4 What is bad about “the West”?
- 5.5 What is good about “the West”?
- 5.6 What is your personal relationship with “the West”?

6. Religion, tradition and modernity

- 6.1 Is it problematic to combine religious (Muslim) beliefs and modern values?
- 6.2 Do you feel that you have to choose between endorsing modernity and tradition?
- 6.3 Do you have problems with your family because of different values and perception of life?

7. Democracy

- 7.1 What do you think of democracy?
- 7.2 Is it a good or a bad system?

8. Closure

- 8.1 Are you against anything in the western societies in regards to culture, politics or economic system?
- 8.2 Do you think there is a clash between the Muslim and the Western civilizations?

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