

Identity and Violence

Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny

Amartya Sen

New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2006

Why is a Nobel laureate in economics writing about the “conceptual disarray” in contemporary theories of identity? In Amartya Sen’s case, two features of his past work equip him for this task. First, his reconceptualization of economics around different human capabilities is mirrored in his emphasis here on the myriad factors in people’s identities. Second, his past arguments against the cultural uniqueness of “Asian values” or “western rights” inform his rejection of any singular idea of individual identity. Most importantly, though, the book draws on Sen’s immense contributions to understanding the contexts and dynamics of reasoned choice inside and outside economics.

In no way is reasoned choice abstract for Sen. It cannot be abstracted *into* discreet modes of rationality—economic, political or scientific. It cannot be abstracted *from* the histories, institutions, activities and associations out of which people build their lives. Instead reasoning must be multidimensional, taking in the full range of economic, cultural and other factors in any judgment. Likewise, choice is always contextual, operating within the loyalties and affiliations that make each person’s identities a “diversely different” combination of class, gender, moral, professional, aesthetic and other ties. Note Sen’s stress on the plural. Each person has plural identities and is therefore responsible for choosing how to prioritize and act on these different attachments. Sen’s conception of identity as plural and reasoned challenges the assumption that people have a singular identity in their racial, ethnic, cultural or religious group (xiv).

The book’s cover art illustrates how singular identities contribute to violence. Jacques-Louis David’s *Intervention of the Sabine Women* depicts the women rushing in between their Sabine fathers and Roman husbands, now at war. With babes in hand and breasts bared, the women offer themselves as wives, daughters and mothers, countering the men’s singular hostility with the pull of complex loyalties that might forge ties of peace. The cover itself shows only a detail of the Roman men and their wives. The Sabine fathers are out of view.

Whether intended or not, this curious narrowing of vision nicely illustrates another of Sen's claims—that academic theories of culture often reinforce singular identities and entrenched conflict in today's world.

Sen directly criticizes theorists of civilizational clash and communitarian belonging for giving unwitting support to the cultivators of sectarian violence. But he also raises questions for scholars of religion. How different, he asks implicitly, is Samuel Huntington's approach in *The Clash of Civilizations* from efforts to understand people in terms of world religions? What strategies are likelier to build bridges to global peace: interfaith dialogues that start from and potentially reify singular religions or public policies and private initiatives that try to exploit the potential for cooperation in the economic, social and political interests that cut across people's plural identities?

Consider Sen's cautions against the post-9/11 rush to label "true Islam" a religion of peace and all "good Muslims" tolerant people. While praising Tony Blair, in particular, for trying to defeat stereotypes of British Muslims, Sen finds two defects in this strategy. First, it makes religion too important to the identity of all Muslims who vary widely in ethnicity, culture, politics and so forth. Second, it leads to policies, including national summits between British politicians and Muslim clergy, that grant authority to religious voices over Muslim civic representatives (77). For Sen, neither religion nor any other singular affiliation should be made the determinant in individual identity, public policy or cultural theory.

Sen develops this thesis through discussions of post-colonialism, multiculturalism and globalization. He cautions against the one-sided politics based on the resentment or admiration the once-colonized feel for their colonizers. He rejects multicultural policies that require people to connect to civil society through monolithic traditions, for example, British government support for sectarian schools. As antidotes to identity politics and claims of western superiority, Sen offers historical vignettes of scientific exchanges from east to west and of non-European leaders who promoted public reasoning, that foundation of democracy. He also ties in his work on human development in questioning the coherence of the term "antiglobalization." As Sen notes, most opponents of *economic* globalization do not reject the global exchange of ideas. In fact, the antiglobalists' concerns about equity demonstrate the depth of their global ethical commitments. Building on these commitments, activists should not simply oppose globalization, Sen argues. They should seek changes in existing legal, political and economic arrangements to foster the conditions and incentives for fairer

distributions of the benefits of global trade.

The book's argument is sweeping at times, making it more useful as a source of ideas for reflection than as a theory of identity or a program for change. The book's conceptual clarity makes it accessible for undergraduates, though the anecdotal evidence may hinder class discussions. Nevertheless two features of the book recommend it for classroom and general use. First, Sen's own remarkably broad vision invites the two things he calls for: 1) responsible reasoning about one's plural identities, and 2) commitments to building a world of broad-visioned people able to connect in new ways (74). Second, Sen's book is useful for its pragmatic conception of religion, which treats religious beliefs and practices as elements of people's plural identities, co-equal with their political, economic and social concerns.

Thus, Sen agrees with a 2005 Amman conference of Muslim clerics who refused to name Daniel Pearl's murderers apostates. While condemning the men's actions and readings of Islam, the clerics noted that in adhering to basic beliefs and practices the men remained Muslims. For Sen the issue cannot simply be whether the men's "religious identity" is true or false, but how their political, social, economic and religious loyalties combine in a singularly hostile identity (80-82). One caveat to Sen's analysis: the components of plural identities may vary in salience. Sen downplays the extent to which religions do order many people's primary commitments and help to extend or restrict their sympathies for distant people. Religions may be more formative than he allows, but his humanely reasoned vision of the plurality of our lives challenges conventional wisdom inside and outside religious studies.

Book Reviewed by:

David M. Craig, Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis