
Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence. The Illusion of Destiny*
(London and New York: Penguin, 2006), 215 pp.

Reviewed by **Marie-Hélène Laforest**

Identity politics has created appalling conditions and deadly conflicts around the world. This often repeated truth is the point of departure for Amartya Sen's reflections in his slim volume, *Identity and Violence. The Illusion of Destiny*. The nine chapters which comprise the text evolve from Sen's own experiences – his background and history, his work as an economist, his observations of contemporary conflicts, and his ethical and humanist stand.

At seventy-six, Sen has lived not only through the partition of his own country, but through many world disasters ensuing from the political use of identities. Thus he knowingly alerts us to the “religious and civilizational partitioning of the world” which, by presuming to “identify, know and determine actions towards a people,” has become, alas, ‘the’ way of dealing with difference. Based on flawed reasoning, “descriptive crudeness and historical innocence”(58), the categorization of human beings in civilizational or religious terms implies a limited view of each culture and an oddly parochial reading of Western civilization. The West's history has, after all, been marked by encounters and appropriations.

Increasingly, however, in both the West and the Rest, a politics of divisiveness has come to predominate and religion has turned into an “allegedly primal way of seeing the differences between people”(10). This has brought about what Sen rightly calls the “miniaturization of human beings”: the wealth of experiences individuals accumulate, their multi-faceted lives are reduced to a single, foundational identity which takes precedence over all others, in all circumstances. The spread of this reductionist view has become the main source of the violence and terrorism afflicting the world.

To counteract this tendency and convince readers otherwise, the Indian economist ventures into the minefield of identity. Perhaps aware of the lost habit of reading a book from cover to cover, he reiterates the plural nature of identity in each chapter. His premise is clear enough: only through “recognition of the plurality of our affiliations and in the use of reasoning as common inhabitants of a wide world”(xvii) does the prospects of peace lie. At the same time, he is eager to point out that the singular categorization of people holds sway not only in Islamic countries, which have come to stand for essentialist attitudes, but in the West as well. For instance, social analysts have theorized identity in an unsatisfactory way and his fellow economists have, more often than not, fallen prey to the idea of singular

affiliation. But, as he points out, there are myriads of ways in which people identify:

I can be, at the same time, an Asian, an Indian citizen, a Bengali with Bangladeshi ancestry, an American or British resident, an economist, a dabbler in philosophy, an author, a Sanskritist, a strong believer in secularism and democracy, a man, a feminist, a heterosexual, a defender of gay and lesbian rights, with a nonreligious lifestyle, a Hindu background, a non-Brahmin, and a nonbeliever in afterlife (and also, in case the question is asked, a non believer in a “before-life” as well).⁽¹⁹⁾

Readers of Sen’s acclaimed economic texts, which earned him the Nobel Prize in 1998, are used to seeing an apparently banal idea transformed into an innovative proposal. Here, the argument goes that if identities are plural, there is more leeway for reaching agreements than “when our differences are narrowed into one devised system of uniquely powerful organization”⁽¹⁷⁾, namely a religious one.

Sen draws on his previous works to argue his case. Traces of *Collective Choice and Social Welfare* (1970), *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (1981), *Choice, Welfare and Measurement* (1982), *Development as Freedom* (1999), *Inequality Re-examined* (1995), are all found here. Readers are left bewildered by the series of thorny issues he manages to compress in *Identity and Violence*. All are directly related to the heart of the matter, to Sen’s fundamental concern on how to reach global peace. Sen deals as much with the Asian countries’ anti- or pro-Westernness, the African countries’ plight, both continents’ reactive policies to the lingering effects of colonialism, the selling of armaments and global justice, as with Muslim history, religious interpretation (*itjehad*), Indian pluralism, antiglobalization protests, and Western misguided policies.

Sectarian violence in Asia and Africa has a common matrix: the social memory of abuses and humiliation – transmitted through literature to which these populations were subjected by Western powers. However, despite their paramount significance, past colonial relations should not have been allowed to determine the countries’ identity formation. Still, in both continents, following decolonization, identities were formed in opposition to the West. Especially in Africa a prevailing anti-Western attitude has grown; whereas in East Asia (Singapore is the lead example), there have also been efforts “to beat the West at its own game”⁽⁹²⁾. In either case, whether through difference or through admiration/imitation, subservience to the West prevails. A decolonization of the mind has not taken place and non-Europeans continue to view themselves as the other of the West. From a cultural viewpoint, this may be too sweeping a statement (both continents abound in decolonized minds) but official government

policies may be another matter. Sen's reasoning seems after all to follow a mainly political logic.

Thus politically speaking Africa, plagued by dictatorships, internecine wars, and stunted economic growth must add to the nefarious legacy of colonialism, the West's recent political and military role. From the Cold War onwards, the two camp division of the world has led the two superpowers to support satraps of the worst sort. The deprecable conduct of rich countries has not abated since they have been militarizing Africa. The violence which flares up in different parts of the continent may derive from a variety of causes, but the world powers' "selling and pushing of arms gives them a continuing role in the escalation of military conflicts today in Africa and elsewhere"(98). To Sen fairer global economic arrangements would change the climate of tolerance of violence in countries which bear the scars of unequal development.

From a different angle, but also influential in promoting terrorism and violence, is the form multiculturalism has taken in the 'overdeveloped countries' as Paul Gilroy dubs the West. In the wake of 9/11 and the July 2005 bombings in England by what the press and Sen define "homegrown terrorists", the practice of multiculturalism needs to be questioned. With this goal in view Sen takes up the case of British multiculturalism with which he is more familiar.

As he recognizes Britain's early efforts to integrate its foreign born population through voting rights and non-discriminatory public services, he is also strongly critical of its idea of multiculturalism. To him, "the existence of a diversity of cultures, which might pass each other like ships in the night"(156) cannot be counted as successful. It is more a case of "plural monoculturalism", whereby each culture is kept separate and an individual's cultural origin becomes determinant. Thus a child born, say, into a Muslim family, is fated with the state's complicity and its acceptance of 'faith schools' to remain within that culture. A child's identity is defined through religious or ethnic a prioris, without him or her having had the opportunity to consider other alternatives. In other words her relation to Britain is "mediated through the 'culture' of the family in which he or she has been born"(158).

A person may well decide that her ethnic or cultural identity is less important to her than, say, her political convictions, or her professional commitments, or her literary persuasions. It is a choice for her to make, no matter what her place is in the strangely imagined 'federation of cultures'.(159)

Sen advocates instead an inclusive form of multiculturalism in which the exercise of cultural freedom and reasoning would allow children of immigrant families to participate freely in civil society and the political

and economic processes ongoing in the country (150). Insightfully, the author takes state policies to task for not recognizing the hybridization which has been going on in the country and overlooking its transformative power, even on traditional definitions of Englishness: “She is as English as daffodils or chicken tikka masala”(154) might be the mantra of a new multicultural Britain.

It is surprising that Sen, in comparing the British and French situations, is critical of the French treatment of its immigrant population on the only basis that it has given rise to violence. Yet, his own position, which values citizenship rights, and the French Republican or secular stand are very similar. The violence which erupted in the *banlieues* in 2005 was not because of lack of voting rights or nondiscriminatory health care, schooling, and social security, which exist in France as in Britain. It was due to the discriminatory everyday practices – granted, more serious in France where job discrimination is ignominious but widespread in both societies. Sen himself recounts to have been the butt of impudent remarks recently. But to him these are not definable as violence. Yet there is a name for the gratuitous verbal attack on Sen at a bus stop “I have seen through you all” (156), or for the question an immigration officer, looking at his home address in England (Master’s Lodge, Trinity College, Cambridge), asks him: whether the Master is a friend of his. Not recognizing an Indian as a Master of Trinity College bears the name of racism. Sen’s ironic eye passes lightly over these episodes, they become secondary to his main concern which is public policies.

Firstly, he writes that sectarian violence “gets significantly reinforced by the implicit support the anti-Western fundamentalist warriors get from theories bred in the West”(58). Secondly, that there is not enough recognition of the ongoing political struggles within the Islamic world where a large number of Muslims do not think solely in terms of their Islamic identity. Thirdly, that attempts at fighting terrorism through recruiting religion “on one’s side” has been ineffective and suffer “from a serious conceptual disorientation”(75). Finally, that the voice of religious authorities has been strengthened while the importance of nonreligious institutions and movements downgraded (77). His plea is therefore addressed to all sides, the West and the Rest, to define identities as plural, to see affiliations as multiple.

Especially in our globalized age, he asserts, with the opportunity of extended networks, great possibilities are available for people to create their sense of self. Individuals indeed have a choice between alternative identities or combination of identities (38). But the “reductionist view” obviously ignores this. It downplays the way in which identities cut across each other, different civilizations borrow from one another, and membership to a particular group varies according to circumstances. This last point

suggests the notion of performativity which has been current in Cultural Studies scholarship since Michel Foucault and since Judith Butler's publication of *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). Performativity points to the process of assuming an identity and allows us to view it as socially constructed rather than fixed and to keep thinking of it as flexible. Performativity refers "not to a singular or deliberate 'act', but is rather the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names"(1993, 3).

It is not the Indian economist's intent to delve into theoretical questions, rather, he quotes well-known examples of encounters, influences, and cross-fertility of times long gone Arab numerals and Chinese printing or the Jewish presence in Muslim Spain. Neither does Sen intend to be drowned by theories of the subject; his practical aim is to convince readers that, for instance, Samuel Huntington's approach was wrong, that if our common humanity takes a back seat to singular identities, we are creating the premises for conflicts of unimaginable magnitude.

The language used by Sen can create some unease in readers. His unfortunate use of the expression "*tolerance* of diversity" refers to an Enlightenment virtue which echoes differently today. But he makes his point nonetheless, through the many examples from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Iraq, and India scattered in the text.

The book's concluding pages increasingly focus on possible solutions to foster "reasoning over unreasoned faith". Sen prioritizes education, state support of secular schooling, curricular changes to stress the robust past interactions between different peoples, and teaching of global history to overcome "the false sense of comprehensive superiority of the West that contributes to identity confrontation in an entirely gratuitous way"(183). Of course, government policies must aim at abolishing the classification of people on a religious basis and putting a stop to acceptance of religious leaders as spokespersons for ethnically defined communities. At the same time secularists must be supported both at home and abroad.

Fixed group ascription implies the denigration of those who are not like us, but what a globalized world needs is exactly the opposite. Sen seems to suggest that thinkers of the calibre of Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore can become our beacons and a country like India our model. The horrors that followed the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards in 1984 seem a history of bygone days.

With an 80% Hindu population, Sen notes, India has at the same time one of the largest Muslim populations in the world, a Sikh Prime Minister, a Muslim president, a Christian-born head of the ruling Congress party, "but all are seen as Indians in general"(167). Sen would like to believe that this Indian political arrangement is the result of a belief in the values he has so convincingly expressed in this volume. We certainly would like him to be right.