

**Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*,**

**W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 2006.**

**ISBN 9780393060072 (HB)**

Amartya Sen is a member of that elite group of public intellectuals who can engage with almost any subject they choose and command attention across the globe. Undoubtedly, as in Sen's case, being a Nobel laureate (in economics), smooths the path from author to publisher and audiences beyond. In this, his latest publication, which he describes as being concerned with the 'miniaturisation of human beings' (p. 185), Sen discusses identity in connection with civilisation, religion and culture, and in the context of history, globalisation and individual freedom. The arguments presented are convincing and persuasively presented, and deserve consideration by anyone interested and concerned with the state of civil society today.

### **Identity and Choice**

Sen's basic thesis is that human beings are multi-identified, with each identity bringing a richness and warmth to our lives as well as constraints and freedoms. Attributes such as nationality, race, religion, community, and class, to name a few, form the basis for choosing how we construct identity in a particular context and at a particular point in time. While highlighting individual freedom to choose our identities, Sen also points to the priorities and pressures that limit this freedom and influence our choice. Challenges may also arise in convincing the world to see us in the same way as we see ourselves, particularly as civil society today tends to privilege religious identity over the political and social. He argues against the economists' reductionism of human beings as self-interested individuals and proposes that instead people need and want to be identified by their connection to a group or groups. Yet he opposes faith-based schools because children are boxed into identities without prior exposure to the possibilities, opportunities and processes of individual reasoning that enable them to choose for themselves. This orientation towards informed reasoning is surely rooted in Sen's own schooling experience at Shantiketan, founded by another Nobel laureate, Rabindranath Tagore, in 1901 in India.

Indeed, at one level the book can be seen as a persuasive plea for reasoned public debate across the board on the troubling issues of our times. Sen even commends anti-Globalisation protests because they focus attention, arouse debate, and attract protestors who are multi-identified by culture, religion, gender, race and politics. However, he acknowledges that the very process of reasoning is determined by the particularity in time and context of each individual's ability and orientation. Too often violence generated by forces that rage around us and embedded in issues of identity – as, for instance, in numerous ethnic conflicts around the world – overwhelms ordinary people. Yet the role of academics, commentators, and social reformers cannot be underestimated. As proof, Sen cites the status of women that was accepted as inferior until questioned by scholars – male and female – as well as by ordinary men and women at a particular point in time.

Sen challenges Samuel Huntington's thesis in *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of the World Order* for categorising human beings by civilisation rather than as individuals with plural identities. The problem with this theory is that it reduces engagement to an 'all or nothing' contest (p. 182). Sen decries this singular-affiliation type of reductionism because it gives human beings a one-dimensional identity, or connection to only a single group. Besides, the impression often conveyed by such theories, some of which are intellectually crude and conceptually simplistic, is that they do not create a confrontation but rather discover it. In an environment of public ignorance these become potent yet acceptable political tools that provide a convenient way of crafting public policy and interacting with the increasingly complex world around us; but it is a dangerous path to take. Not only has it generated violence and strife around the world, it is also undeniably inaccurate as most individuals have plural identities that are often in contrast to each other. Sen warns that 'cultivated theory can bolster uncomplicated bigotry' (p. 44), and points to the crude classifications along civilisational lines such as describing India as a Hindu civilisation. He also argues against 'reliance on civilisational partitioning' (p. 57) because its methodology and historicity are flawed. In short, singular identity is an illusion and those who foster violence promote and exploit it by ignoring all affiliations that might allow for other identities to exist, and by redefining one's 'sole' identity in a more belligerent form.

## **Identity and Religion**

In discussing the limitations of identity in terms of religion, Sen highlights the variations within the Muslim religious identity. He turns to history to describe instances of Muslim tolerance and diversity, secular concerns and priorities, and seminal contributions to science and mathematics. Sen argues for situating Muslims in the broader context of their affiliations – both religious and non-religious – rather than only within the narrow confines of their Islamic beliefs. Not only does this approach generate knowledge about Islam and avoid the political polarisation of Muslims, it also highlights the internal variations of countries with Muslim majorities and undermines the emphasis on religion that is a potent recruiting tool for terrorist groups. Sen regrets calls from governments for Muslim religious heads to be leaders of political and social issues and to intervene in the ‘war against terrorism’ merely because terrorists are followers of Islam. Such actions assume a singular-affiliation view of the community by conflating political and social affiliations of individual Muslims with religious identity. In this context, the growth of religious fundamentalism and militant recruitment even in Western countries, he says, ‘should not have come as a surprise’ (p. 78). Instead, to support his argument, Sen cites Muslim scholars who have argued that followers must believe in, as well as put into practise, the basic tenets of the faith they profess. The underlying premise being that religious identity is about religious adherence, and not merely a matter of declaration either by the individual him/herself or the community at large.

## **Identity and Culture**

Sen discusses the significance of the earlier role of many non-Western countries as colonies of European powers and concludes that ‘the colonised mind is parasitically obsessed with the extraneous relation with the colonial powers’ (p. 89). One consequence of this mentality is ignorance of the global origins of democracy and freedom and the non-Western foundations of science and mathematics. Another is that spiritual superiority, which in current-speak implies religious fundamentalism, is rooted in the East. Yet a further intellectual trap is the habit of defining oneself as ‘the other’, the non-Westerner, in terms of how one is different from Western people as in

Singapore's glorification of 'Asian values' (see p. 93). Unfortunately, this non-Western positioning often conflates with an anti-Western stance that can be equally important for national pride, as it is in terrorist recruitment. Sen points out that it is also significant in the dialectics of the colonised mind and cites as example, South Africa's rejection of anti-AIDS strategies due to the 'mistrust of science that has traditionally been controlled by white people' (p. 92). The challenge is to dismantle the colonised mindset for which the West is central on the one hand, while on the other to end the nexus between erstwhile colonisers and the politics and economies of former colonies that manifests itself in control and interference. Sen suggests that the difficulties of achieving this are exacerbated by singular-affiliations and solitary identities and priorities that, if predicated on religious beliefs, often promote religious fundamentalism.

While culture is important, it is not crucial to the identity of an individual or a group or even a country because its influence is modulated by a host of other factors such as gender, race, class, and politics. Secondly, 'cultures' more correctly reflects the inherent heterogeneity that exists within any given culture and the dynamism that transforms it from time to time. No culture can be deemed 'insular', least of all in this cyber-age. Sen points out, in the context of multiculturalism, that there is a fine balance between cultural freedom and cultural conservation, cultural diversity and cultural conservatism, and argues that faith-based schools promote society as a 'federation of communities' (p. 118).

Sen presents two, basically distinct, approaches to multiculturalism. One celebrates diversity as a value in itself promoting isolation of any group or individual in society and a singular-affiliation view of human beings. The other celebrates reason and freedom to choose above cultural diversity encouraging interaction, and viewing people as multi-identified. To support this argument Sen points out that Britain's pride in its multicultural society is misplaced because its form of multiculturalism is in fact 'plural monoculturalism' (p. 156), with many of its public policies only serving to promote the isolation that already exists between communities. He argues that each culture is tolerated but only within the parameters of its adherents (Regrettably, in our own Australian form of Multiculturalism, patriarchal hegemonies among cultural minorities are often co-opted by governments in power to contain societal plurality).

In practise, the choices are isolation or interaction, both of which impinge on individual freedom. Muslim women can wear the *hijab* but only while isolated within the confines of their own communities. In interacting with the wider, mainstream culture they must switch to the norms expected in that context and that may include discarding the *hijab*. Sen proposes, instead, a model of what he terms ‘mono-pluralism’ which is the freedom to choose one’s cultural practises from a range of possibilities in a multicultural environment. In such a multicultural society all groups are viewed as equal citizens with the freedom to choose the cultural norms by which they wish to conduct different aspects of their lives, and the assurance of acceptance and tolerance whatever the choice may be. The choice, according to Sen, should only be limited by the cultures experienced, much as the choice of cuisine is limited by availability, and the real test of a truly multicultural society is the extent to which it practises mono-pluralism.

In Sen’s view the dismissal of Globalisation as neo-colonialism is akin to Western rejection of the science and mathematics that originated in the East, and could be a backward step for all of civilisation. Instead, globalisation should privilege inclusion over exclusion and ensure for all a future of less disparities. Sen argues that in this paradigm the onus is not on the beneficiary – ‘the buyer of the car’ – but, rather on the West – ‘the owner of the car’ (p. 137) – and indeed the originator of the technology. Undoubtedly, public debate on Globalisation could go a long way towards defusing the construction and confrontation of divisive identities, and generating a reasoned and fair outcome across the board. It could also promote institutional reforms based on intellectual fairness with regard to the past and the present in terms of colonial histories and mindsets. Sen is optimistic for democracy globally and cites international agencies such as the United Nations and the World Bank as promoting this outcome. Sadly, herein lies the book’s drawback. Sen deconstructs today’s world and the issues that rage around the question of identity brilliantly, but he fails to offer solutions that go beyond the current institutional regime, and in an environment that cries out for solutions this is a deep disappointment.

The book is one in a series titled “Issues of Our Time” edited by Henry L. Gates (Other authors in the series include philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah and lawyer Alan Dershowitz). Sen writes lucidly, and clearly has the gift of conveying complex

ideas in a simple, and at times, chatty style littered with colloquialisms and self-deprecatory humour. Being an avowed feminist he has adopted the use of the pronoun 'she' rather than 'he' for generic use. However, this being a collection of essays and lectures there are repetitions, such as the quote from the pronouncements of Akbar, the Great Moghul, on religious tolerance (p. 50, Chapter 3 and again on p. 64, Chapter 4), which become more obvious in a book of less than 200 pages. Extensive notes that accompany each essay are indicative of Sen's commitment to scholarly rigour and public debate as they provide useful references for further reading and reasoning. Overall this is a succinct presentation, and a good example of 'less is more'.

**Selena Costa-Pinto,**  
**School of Historical Studies, Monash University.**