

Illusions of identity

Amartya Sen discusses his new book, in which he claims that the British approach to multiculturalism has undermined individual freedom

By Kenan Malik

August 27, 2006

AUGUST 2006

Identity and Violence

by Amartya Sen (Allen Lane, £16.99)

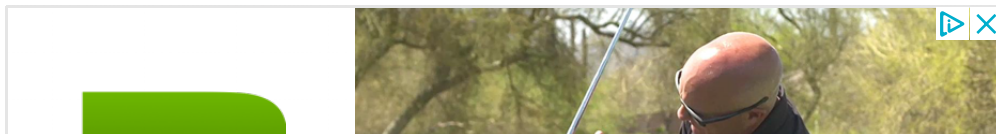
Just before the anniversary of the 7/7 London bombings, a public argument broke out between Tony Blair and Britain's Muslim leaders about the lack of progress in combating home-grown terrorism. Muslims accused the government of ignoring their advice about how best to deal with extremists. The real problem, the prime minister responded, was that moderate Muslims had not done enough to root out extremists within their own communities.

The starting point for both sides was the belief that Muslims constitute a community with a distinct set of views and beliefs, and that mainstream politicians are incapable of reaching out to them. So there had to be a bargain between the government and the Muslim community. The government acknowledged Muslim leaders as crucial partners in the task of defeating terrorism and building a fairer society. In return, Muslim leaders agreed to keep their own house in order. The argument was about who was, or was not, keeping their side of the bargain.

For Amartya Sen it is the bargain itself that is the problem. Why, he asks in his new book *Identity and Violence*, "should a British citizen who happens to be Muslim have to rely on clerics and other leaders of the religious community to communicate with the prime minister?"

At 72, Sen still retains all of his intellectual vigour. He divides his time between India, America, Britain and Italy. Home for him is not a country but a way of life. “I was born in a university campus and seem to have lived all my life in one campus or another,” he has said of himself. In 1998 he was awarded the Nobel prize in economics for his work on the relatively abstruse area of social choice theory. But it is his writings on equality, development and the causes of famines that have given him a standing outside of academia. In *Identity and Violence* he has turned his attention from economics to what he sees as the most troubling issue of our times.

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At the heart of the book is an argument against what Sen calls the communitarian view of identity—the belief that identity is something to be “discovered” rather than chosen. “There is a certain way of being human that is my way,” the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor wrote in his much-discussed essay “The Politics of Recognition.” “I am called upon to live my life in this way.” But who does the calling? Seemingly the identity itself. For Taylor, as for many communitarians, identity appears to come first, with the human actor following in its shadow. Or, as the philosopher John Gray has put it, identities are “a matter of fate, not choice.”

Sen will have none of it. “There are two issues here,” he says when I meet him at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he was master until returning to Harvard two years ago. “First, the recognition that identities are robustly plural and the importance of one identity need not obliterate another. And second, that a person has to make choices about what relative importance to attach, in a particular context, to their divergent loyalties and identities. The individual belongs to many different groups and it’s up to him or her to decide which of those groups he or she would like to give priority to.” We are multitudes and we can choose among our multitudes.

Sen is particularly critical of the ways in which communitarian notions of identity have found their way into social policy, especially through the ideas of multiculturalism, and in so doing have diminished the scope for individual freedom. “I am not opposed to multiculturalism,” he says. “But I am opposed to the way it has been interpreted. There are two basically distinct approaches to multiculturalism. One concentrates on the promotion of diversity as a value in itself. The other focuses on the freedom of reasoning and decision-making, and celebrates cultural diversity to the extent that it is freely chosen. The way that British authorities have interpreted multiculturalism has very much undermined individual freedom. A British Muslim is not asked to act within the civil society or the political arena but as a Muslim. His British identity has to be mediated by his community.”

What policymakers have created in Britain, Sen suggests, is not multiculturalism but “plural monoculturalism,” a system in which people are constantly herded into different identity pens. “Take the case of the Bangladeshis,” says Sen. “Bangladesh’s separation from Pakistan was not based on their religion but on their language, their literature and their secular politics. At the time of independence Bangladeshis who came here had a very strong sense of Bengali identity. But all that disappeared, because the official government classification ignored language, culture and secular politics, and insisted on viewing all Bangladeshis as Muslims. Suddenly they had lost all identity other than being Islamic. And suddenly Bangladeshis stopped being Bangladeshis and were merged with all other Muslims from Morocco to Indonesia.”

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“We have a system in which Muslim organisations are in charge of all Muslims, Hindu organisations in charge of all Hindus, Jewish organisations in charge of all Jews and so on.” This parcelling out of the nation can only weaken civil society. “In downplaying political and social identities, as opposed to religious identities, the government has weakened civil society precisely when there is a great need to strengthen it.”

Multicultural policies, in other words, have allowed mainstream politicians to abandon their responsibilities for engaging directly with Muslim communities. Far from promoting a sense of integration, the policy has encouraged Muslims to see themselves as semi-detached.

There is much that I agree with in Sen’s broadside against identity politics and the consequences of multicultural policies. Indeed, I have argued on similar lines in various essays in *Prospect*. There is much to admire, too, in Sen’s stress on human choices and in his insistence on the importance of reasoned reflection. So why do I also find his argument unsatisfying?

Sen takes for granted that we all possess multiple identities but never defines what he means by an identity. The result is that it seems to mean just about anything you want it to mean. The same person, Sen suggests, “can be without contradiction, an American citizen, of Caribbean origin, with African ancestry, a Christian, a liberal, a woman, a historian, a novelist, a feminist, a heterosexual, a believer in gay and lesbian rights, a theatre lover, an environmental activist, a tennis fan, a jazz musician, and someone who is deeply committed to the view that there are intelligent beings in outer space with whom it is extremely urgent to talk (preferably in English).”

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Indeed she can. But what does that tell us about identity? After all, few people would deny that you could be a Christian and a tennis fan, or that someone with African ancestry could believe in English-speaking aliens. In conflating tastes, aptitudes, predilections, given biological traits, inherited cultural affiliations and acquired political beliefs into a single list, as if they all mattered equally in discussion of identity, is Sen not trivialising the concept of identity and making it more difficult to understand what it is about the contemporary world that makes identity politics both so significant and so problematic?

“I’m not saying that being a football fan is of the same order as being a liberal or conservative,” he replies. “One could be immensely more important than the other, depending on the person. It is not just that our priorities may vary according to context, but we also have to determine what the nature of the particular context is. I might decide that it is frivolous to go to a football match when something important like voting is taking place. So my loyalty to a football club and my loyalty to a political ideal may clash. And I will then have to determine where will I go. We all face this kind of decision.”

But this seems a banal way of looking at the problem. After all, what has made the question of identity important is not that individuals do not know how to choose which hat to wear and when, but that collectively hat-wearing fashions have changed. Certain social affiliations have acquired new significance while others have faded away. In this post-ideological age, people are less likely than they were to define social solidarity in political terms—as collective action in pursuit of political ideals. The question people ask themselves is not so much “what kind of society do I want to live in?” as “who are we?” As political identities have weakened, so people have come to view themselves more in terms of their cultural, ethnic or religious affiliations. And they see those identities as given rather than chosen.

What is important, then, is not that people have forgotten that they possess multiple identities. It is rather that political identities have so little significance that people often look elsewhere for meaning—to faith, culture or ethnicity. For an author who places such great stress on the importance of context, Sen makes little attempt to place the debate about identity itself in a social or historical context.

One consequence of this is a skewed notion of choice. Take, for instance, the argument that multicultural policies have imposed upon Bangladeshis the single identity of being Muslim. Policies have certainly done this. At the same time, though, many have also chosen to view themselves primarily as Muslim. Why? Partly because as wider political attachments have eroded, so Islam for many has provided a sense of anchorage and meaning in their lives. Identity and Violence reads sometimes as if people should only have choice if they make the right choice. Does Sen really believe that?

“Quite often people are pressured into making choices which are not based on reflection,” he replies. “It is patronising to think that a person is not capable of better reflection; that somehow some people are doomed to think in a peculiarly narrow and limited way. We are forced to think that by propaganda, by pressure and a sense of identity. It relates to Karl Marx’s false consciousness. You may have the sense that this is the objective thing to do. But in fact it is illusory. I do have prejudices but my prejudice is the belief that we human beings all have the capacity to think about moral and political issues and when we don’t do it, I tend to attribute it to pressure.”

I share Sen’s prejudices. I share too his fears about identity politics and the consequences of cultural pluralism. But I also think that the debate about identity is more complex, and less black and white, than he appears to believe.

Kenan Malik

Kenan Malik is author of “From Fatwa to Jihad: The Rushdie Affair and its Legacy” (Atlantic), from which this interview is taken

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