

Identity and Violence: the illusion of destiny

Amartya Sen

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Reviewed by

Tony Gallagher

There was a time when the conflict in Northern Ireland looked like an anachronistic throw-back to disputes last relevant in 17th Century Europe. After the end of the Cold War it began to look less atypical as ethnic and religious fissures reopened across Central and Eastern Europe. This was also when Samuel Huntington predicted a new global order through the ‘clash of civilisations’ in which global divisions based on ideological or economic positions would be displaced by divisions based on culture. For Huntington culture was based on ‘objective elements’ such as language, religion, history and customs, and by the ‘subjective self-identification of peoples’. Culture, he argued, would form the primary basis for global conflict because the onward march of globalisation weakened localised identities, shrunk the world and heightened tensions between the West and the Rest. Cultural identities were fundamental and immutable. For these reasons, he argued, they were less amenable to compromise than ideological or economic identities. Initially the European fissures referred to above seemed to justify his hypothesis. The bomb attacks on New York (September 11), Madrid (March 11), Bali (October 2) and London (July 7) seemed to many only to have enhanced his prescience.

Amartya Sen disagrees and in ‘Identity and Violence’ challenges Huntington’s argument and the essentialism which lies at its heart. For Sen identity is multi-faceted and there is no reason to allow any one dimension of identity to predominate over all others. In particular, he suggests, religion need not be an all-encompassing or exclusive basis for identity, even though he is

realistic enough to accept that the reductive simplicities of a bi-polar conflict suits those who would foment violence:

‘The insistence ... on a choiceless singularity of human identity not only diminishes us all, it also makes the world much more flammable’.

Sen also challenges the idea that we can talk about ‘civilisations’ as if each was a simple, unitary homogeneous mass. Thus, for example, although Huntington places India in the Hindu civilisation, it has many more Muslim citizens than many of the countries that, according to Huntington’s definition, form the Islamic civilisation.

Sen’s suggests that the essentialist argument he identifies at the heart of the ‘clash of civilisations’ rests on two untenable assumptions. He labels the first of these assumptions the notion of ‘identity disregard’ and links it to a vision of human behaviour which claims that people act solely or mainly in terms of narrow self-interest. The second mistake lies in the ‘assumption of singular affiliation’, that is, that our identity is comprised of many parts, no one of which must be assumed to be more important than another. He illustrates this idea as follows:

‘The same person can, for example, be a British citizen, of Malaysian origin, with Chinese racial characteristics, a stockbroker, a nonvegetarian, an asthmatic, a linguist, a bodybuilder, a poet, an opponent of abortion, a bird-watcher, an astrologer, and one who believes that God created Darwin to test the gullible’.

Most of the criticism of Sen seems to focus on this part of his argument. One view, for example, suggests that Sen’s position offers a loose relativism in which all aspects of identity are assumed to be equally important, or unimportant. This view suggests that Sen fails to engage with the reality that some aspects of identity are, in fact, more significant, in terms of their motivational affect, than others.

Another criticism of Sen is that his analysis provides little basis for action, but this seems to be belied by his direct engagement with the current debate on multiculturalism. Sen highlights an important difference between priorities based on interaction or isolation. A version of multiculturalism which is

premised on the priority of interaction highlights the importance of hybridity and the intermingling of traditions. On the other hand, a version of multiculturalism which is premised on the priority of isolation is little more than 'plural monoculturalism' if it privileges difference to the extent of fixing people within impermeable silos:

'There would be serious problems with the moral and social claims of multiculturalism if it were taken to insist that a person's identity must be defined by his or her community or religion, overlooking all the other affiliations a person has ... and through giving automatic priority to inherited religion or tradition over reflection and choice' (p160).

Older versions of multiculturalism seem to have privileged difference to the extent that priority has been given to maintaining the cultural integrity of communities, whatever the consequence for individual members of those communities, or wider issues related to a notion of the common good. Sen is arguing for a view of multiculturalism which privileges interactivity and change, and seeks to protect the autonomy of the individual over the community.

This has a clear resonance for Northern Ireland and our continuing debate over a shared future. The debate itself was characterised by competing views over the nature of sharing: one view was that there were two communities, politics was about managing the differences between them and special action was required in contexts where it spilled into violence. The alternative view was that a shared future should be based on the weakening of institutional boundaries and the active encouragement of shared practice in as many aspects of life as possible. The official emergent view from the debate took the latter position, and this seems to be linked to Sen's preferred model of multiculturalism, that is for one based on the priorities of interaction.

However, the new political direction emerging from the St Andrew's talks seems to be moving us along a different path in which the governments are so keen to secure a political deal that they are prepared to underpin ethnic essentialism. The revised arrangements for the Assembly reinforce, rather than weaken, the role of the ethnic blocs in key votes. Add this to the territorial carve-up that seems likely to follow the formation of the seven new 'super-councils' and Northern Ireland seems to look increasingly like Belgium.

Belgium, of course, is characterised by internal language borders and such a high level of federalist decentralisation to the Flemish and Walloon communities that many suggest that, apart from the flag, monarch and football team, there is little left that is Belgian per se. To go down this path is to pursue a future based on the priority of isolation, less a 'shared future' than a 'shared-out future'.