

‘IDENTITY AND VIOLENCE: THE ILLUSION OF DENSITY’

BY AMARTYA SEN

215pp, ALLEN LANE, 2006

IRFAN SHEIKH

College of Humanities and Sciences

PAF-Karachi Institute of Economics and Technology

irfansheikh_121@yahoo.com

Amartya Sen, Professor of Economics at Harvard and a Nobel laureate, recalls his memories when as a child he witnessed an unknown man stumbling into the garden of his parents' house, bleeding heavily and asking for water. Sen shouted for his parents, and his father took the man to a hospital, where he died of his injuries. The victim was a Muslim day-laborer who had been stabbed by Hindus during the riots that occurred in Bengal in the last years of the British Raj. Sen continues to be not only horrified but also baffled by the communal violence he witnessed at that time. As he puts it in 'Identity and Violence': "Aside from being a veritable nightmare, the event was profoundly perplexing." Why should people who have lived together peacefully suddenly turn on one another in years of violence that cost hundreds of thousands of lives? How could the poor day-laborer be seen as having only one identity – as a Muslim who belonged to an "enemy" community – when he belonged to many other communities as well? "For a bewildered child," Sen writes, "the violence of identity was extraordinarily hard to grasp. It is not particularly easy for a still bewildered elderly adult."

'Identity and Violence' is his attempt to overcome that bewilderment. As an economist, Sen has been hugely influential, helping to explore the new discipline of social choice theory and winning the Nobel prize for economic sciences in 1998. Through his seminal studies of famine and his theory of freedom as a positive condition involving the full exercise of human capabilities, he has done more to criticize standard models of economic development than any other living thinker. In his new book he writes more as a liberal philosopher than as an economist. Impassioned, eloquent and often moving, 'Identity and violence' is a sustained attack on the "solitarist" theory which says that human identities are formed by membership of a single social group. Sen believes this solitarist fallacy shapes much communal and multicultural thinking, as well as Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" theory. In each case it involves the fallacy of defining the multiple and shifting identities present in every human being in terms of a single, unchanging essence. In Sen's view the idea that we can be divided up in this way leads to a "miniaturization" of humanity, with everyone locked up in tight little boxes from which they emerge only to attack one another.

Far too much violence in the world today is fomented by the illusion that people are destined to a "sectarian singularity." Stereotyping people with a singular identity leads to fatalism, resignation, and a sense of inevitability about violence. It partitions people and civilizations into binary oppositions, ignores the plural ways that people understand themselves, and obscures what Sen calls our "diverse diversities." In particular, he objects to the "clash of civilizations" thesis made popular by Samuel Huntington. Along the way he explores the implications of his thesis for multiculturalism, public policy, globalization, terrorism, anti-Western rage, democracy, and theories of culture.

Sen argues against identity violence caused by the illusion of destiny in **three ways**. **First**, he appeals to our common humanity: everyone laughs at weddings, cries at funerals, and worries about their children. More important than any of our external differences, even though these are powerful and important, is our shared humanity. **Second**, he makes the obvious point that all people enjoy plural identities. To understand a person one must consider factors of civilization, religion, nationality, class, community, culture, gender, profession, language, politics, morals, family of origin, skin color, and a multitude of other markers. Plus, these diverse differences within a single individual depend on one's social context, whether the trait is durable over time, relevant, a factor of constraint or free choice, and so on. **Finally**, Sen urges us to transcend the illusion of destiny and identity violence by what he calls "reasoned choice." Instead of living as if some irrational fate destines people to confrontation with others who are different, a person needs to make a rational choice about what relative importance to attach to any single trait. Although he never explains why rational people succumb to the irrational violence of identity instead of choosing enlightened self-interest, economic incentives, and geo-political peace, this readable book by one of the most brilliant eastern thinkers conveys an important reminder: "We can do better".