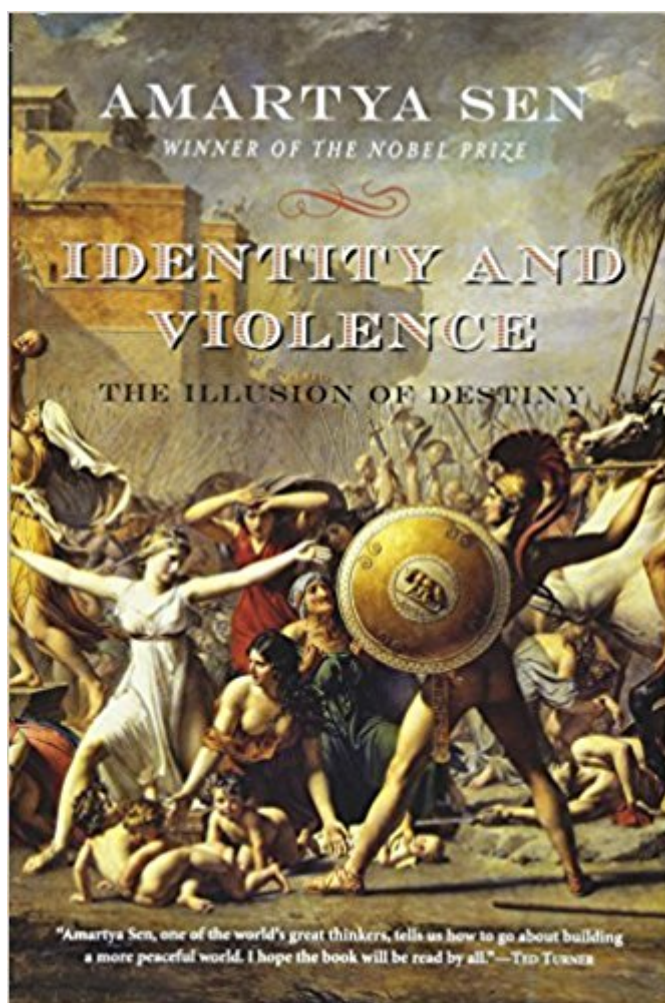


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Identity And Violence: The Illusion Of Destiny (Issues Of Our Time)



Synopsis

“One of the few world intellectuals on whom we may rely to make sense out of our existential confusion.” —Nadine Gordimer In this sweeping philosophical work, Amartya Sen proposes that the murderous violence that has riven our society is driven as much by confusion as by inescapable hatred. Challenging the reductionist division of people by race, religion, and class, Sen presents an inspiring vision of a world that can be made to move toward peace as firmly as it has spiraled in recent years toward brutality and war.

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Customer Reviews

Nobel Prize-winning economist Sen deplores the "little boxes" that divide us in this high-minded but seldom penetrating brief against identity politics. Sen observes that ideologies of hate typically slot people into communities based on a single dimension that trumps the multifaceted affinities of class, sex, politics and personal interest that make up individual identities. This "reductionist" us-versus-them outlook is not limited to jihadists, he argues, but is a widespread intellectual tendency seen in Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" paradigm, in postcolonial critiques of democracy and rationalism as "Western" ideals, as well as in efforts to "dialogue" with moderate Muslims. (These last, he feels, pigeonhole Muslims in purely religious terms.) Sen rebuts the "singular affiliation" falsehood with a cursory historical, literary and cultural survey of the diversity of supposedly monolithic civilizations (Akbar, a 16th-century Mughal emperor and champion of

religious toleration, is a favorite citation.) Sen's previous work (Development as Freedom) injected liberal values into development economics; here, he argues that the freedom to choose one's identity affiliations is the antidote to divisive extremism. Stitched together from lectures, the book is dry and repetitive. While Sen's defense of humane pluralism against narrow-minded communalism is laudable, he never really elucidates the social psychology that translates group identity into violence. (Mar.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Violence is "promoted by a sense of inevitability about some allegedly unique--often belligerent--identity that we are supposed to have," argues Sen in this rejection of the civilizational or religious partitioning that defines human beings by their membership in a particular group. Reminding us that each person is actually a composite of many affiliations, the author informs us that he is Asian, an Indian citizen, a Bengali with Bangladeshi ancestry, an economist, a teacher of philosophy, a Sanskritist, a believer in secularism and democracy, a man, a feminist, and a nonbeliever in afterlife; he omits, perhaps out of modesty, that he is a Nobel Prize winner. Those who would define themselves according to one monolithic system of categories (read jihadists, communitarians, and Samuel Huntington and his followers), says Sen, ignore both the composite nature of humankind and the freedom to choose how much importance to attach to a particular affiliation in a particular context and, in doing so, perpetuate sectarian violence. The key to peace, then, is the rejection of stereotypes in favor of humane pluralism. Pithy and optimistic. Brendan Driscoll Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

I thought Sen accurately nailed the problem on the head - strong identities lend themselves to violence. This is an inherent problem with identity. When you form strong attachments with like-minded people, you must by necessity be exclusive. The dark side of exclusivity is that people often times treat the 'other' as the 'enemy.' This is not to say that identity per se is evil or even anti-social. Quite the contrary. As Robert Putnam correctly points out in *Bowling Alone*, there is enormous positive value in forming close-knit communities, not the least of which is that it forces you to be less selfish. There is no selfishness like being a loner. So far, so good. I think where Sen's book runs into trouble is his critique of Sam Huntington's seminal book - *The Clash of Civilizations*. Huntington's thesis is that the world is no longer driven by ideological struggle (communism vs. free capitalism) but now by civilizational struggle (the prime example being Islamic vs. Western). Sen

objects to this civilizational paradigm as being too reductionistic and instead advocates seeing people as belonging to a complex web of associations, with civilizational/religious ties being one of many. As Sen puts it, a Christian and a Muslim will be less at odds with each other if they realize that they share other identities, like gender, class, profession, interests, etc. There are several problems with Sen's argument. (1) Huntington's thesis does have its flaws, as all meta-theories invariably do (for instance, India, as Sen points out, is not singularly an Hindu civilization), but I think it's pretty much on the mark with Islamists and many others. So Huntington's book is descriptive, not prescriptive. Sen's book is prescriptive, but tries to come off as descriptive. (2) Sen is convinced, wrongly, that it is only a small cadre of self-appointed leaders who have whipped up the general population and imposed, quite artificially, these civilizational/religious identities for their own power-hungry reasons. No doubt there are people who cynically use identity for their own gain (the Chinese Politburo immediately comes to mind). But I think it is Sen who is now reductionistic, kinda insulting to non-elites, and frankly conspiratorial. (3) Sen seems to think religious identity should have the same force, no more and no less, than any of several identities. But this is a fundamental misunderstanding of religion. Religion, by definition, demands ultimate allegiance. I think this is difficult for Sen as a self-confessed secularist to understand. (4) Sen is absolutely wrong in his insistence that singular identities cause violence while multi-form identities lend themselves to peace. This is a fundamental misunderstanding of violence. Strong, singular identities may be the avenue through which violence is exercised, but there is something twisted and evil in the heart of man that will use any platform, any paradigm to destroy and kill. The real question should be: what kind of exclusive identity will nevertheless embrace the alien 'other'? (Aside: as a Christian, may I say that if the core of your identity is a man who died for his enemies, that will lend itself to the most embracing kind of strong identity.) This is unrelated to Sen's argument, but may I grip about his prose a bit? First, I found Sen's syntax to be unnecessarily complicated. Second, Sen is incredibly repetitive. He basically says that same thing over and over and over again. How many ways can you extol the benefits of complex identities? Pluriform, variegated, sundry, multitudinous identities? If you find yourself looking at the same entry in your thesaurus over and over again, maybe it's time to find something new to say...I want to conclude by saying that I really enjoyed Sen's book overall. He made many incisive points, such as arguing against the idea that democracy is the province of 'Western' thinking. Sen rightly rejects that kind of misguided and patronizing cultural relativism. I thought his foray into Muslim history was really interesting and informative. And here, Sen made a very interesting point that one cannot condemn violence or even terrorism as being strictly anti-Muslim, as Islamic thought is not, nor cannot be, settled on the subject. As for Sen's earnest

plea for a civil society in which religion has a diminished role, I think Sen betrays too much his own narrow secularist vision. I don't think an enlarged role of religion in the public sphere necessarily means a less rational world. Prof Sen, why should they have to be at cross purposes? A thought-provoking read throughout!

This is one of my favorite books of all time. Having travelled to over 50 countries and studying identities, I think this is a guidebook for anyone wanting to understand identity.

Funny. Nice.

I ordered this text for my class for my masters degree and it was an interesting read even as a textbook. I not only learned something, but was entertained in the process. Lots of insight that I required for my class and I will probably keep it and read the entire book.

By far my favorite non-fiction, Sen really dissects the tendency not only toward societal movements that inflict violence but also by individuals based on the constructs of identity.

The book makes two main arguments. First it argues that identities are rational constructions where group allegiances of all sorts play a part. Second it argues that globalization, though an unqualified good in principle, is in practice often merely a way for some group in a globalizing nation to reap most of the benefits while others suffer most of ill consequences. Both arguments work together in Sen's view of how one might best understand the phenomena of *opposition to the west*. We (G8 nations) have fallen into the habit of seeing nations as wholes characterized by specific identities. Sen suggests that we'd understand phenomena like Saudi-born terror groups or mass disaffection with the G8 by the citizens of Latin America, by learning to see the world in a less reductionist fashion: namely intersections of various groups overlapping in persons and populations. Sen's prose is quite clear, and I find his claims rather convincing. The book's style is a bit grating though. It's very repetitive. The same ideas resurface again and again along with the same examples. I suspect the book is really a compilation of speeches Sen has given. Repetition is necessary in speaking because the audience doesn't have time to step back and make the connections themselves. But in a book like this, already quite short, it's a waste of the reader's time. Also Sen is not very careful with his historical examples. One recurring story he cites is how Maimonides fled Christian Europe for Saladin's Egypt. Not true. Maimonides fled Almohad (and thus Islamic) Andalus for Saladin's

Egypt. This was an easy fact to check, and you'd think an author of Sen's stature would take the time to make sure an example he will use four or five times is correct. The book is definitely worth reading. I only wish the author had spent just a bit more time tightening it up and doing a bit more fact checking.

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