

**IDENTITY AND VIOLENCE IN CONTEMPORARY
INTERNATIONAL POLITICS**

Identity and Violence by **Amartya Sen**, published by the Penguin Group, 2006, xx+215 including Notes, Names Index and Subject Index, hardback £16.99

The title of this book captures the most significant forces at play in contemporary international politics. Both are an illusion; identity an illusion of uniqueness of and therefore a destiny for a particular group and violence an illusion that its force can and will achieve a desired destiny. As we are confronted daily by violence taking place whether in Iraq, Sudan, Israel, Palestine, Somalia... all in the name of freedom and justice we must at times wonder about the feebleness of those cherished values and the cruelty with which humans are willing to pursue them. We do not need to rehearse the reasoning with which each community justifies the hostility and violence towards the 'enemy' community. History of humanity has been rehearsing the story of this 'cultivated' violence associated with identity conflicts for centuries. Identities, the aims, the retributions, the reasoning, the intensity and methods change, but the story remains a bewildering one whereby universal principles of freedom, choice and justice are betrayed by beliefs in uniqueness of a particular identity rather than in uniqueness of humanity.

Amartya Sen is a Nobel Prize winning economist (1998). During his distinguished career into famine and social choice theory he has been a severe critic of standard models of development a defender of freedom as a positive condition involving the full exercise of human capabilities. He is a humanist in the tradition of Edward Said who growing up in Bengal during the last years of the British Raj witnessed communal violence between Hindus and Muslims and was bewildered by the suddenness of shifting identities from neighbours to 'rediscovered' enemies. This beautifully written book is an attempt to overcome this bewilderment and find the answer to the fundamental question 'why'?

At the outset it must be said that he does not succeed and that for at least three reasons. First, in his plea for reason he displays almost an astonishing lack of understanding that reason is not valued equally by all and that reason requires a choice which may not be available to all. Second, in his attempt to unpick the appeal of collective identity he underestimates the politics of nationalism which have imbued cultural identities with political legitimacy unrivalled by other ideologies seeking to forge a collective solidarity in times of insecurity and unrest (more on this point below). Third, as an intellectual of a considerable distinction he refuses to accept (against all evidence) that violence is not a result of the confusion of mind on the part of perpetrators, but a result of fear, ignorance, cruelty and other universal characteristics of humanity which under certain conditions can be politicised to great and violent effect.

The book offers a great historical sweep across the cultures, religions and civilisations and must be applauded for its reasoning against the categorisation of people into 'singular affiliations' (p. 25) and ignorance of their human diversities. The reader is reminded throughout of the crudeness and oversimplification of, for example, Samuel Huntington's

‘clash of civilisations’ thesis (p.11), thus reducing all Muslims to a currently highly politicized religious identity and ignoring their other and more than evident political, historical, scientific, literary and professional involvements (p.71-80). By the same token, reminding us of Sartre’s maxim that ‘antisemites make a Jew’ (p.7) he argues that Jews and Muslims historically got on, even if the persuasiveness of this argument is somewhat diminished by having to go as far back as the 12th Century Europe (p.66).

Given the disastrous situation in Iraq, the continuation of politically mislabelled ‘war on terror’ and the ever worsening relations between ‘the West and the rest’ (R.Scruton), we must concede that Sen’s attack on the politicization of religious identity (all religions) is timely and worth our most sincere consideration. The important question whether for ‘the sake of cultural diversity we should support cultural conservatism’ (p.116, in the form of ‘faith’ schools for example in Britain) and thus give too much opportunity to sectarianism is analysed through the liberal vision of someone who believes in the nation being a conglomeration of citizens rather than a collectivity of religious ethnicities (p.181). As much as this reviewer shares this sentiment, it needs to be remarked that Sen’s vision of civic nationalism is a version of nationalism nevertheless and that nationalism in whatever form as the integral process of state-creation has had a long and bloody history of violence. Sen appears oddly naïve in thinking that the conflation of cultural and political in the form of the nation-state provides a bulwark against human misery; whilst the humanity remains divided into national groups based on some putative reference to ethnic homogeneity, the identity-driven competition for power and control of resources is never too far away.

Identity and Violence is a sustained attack on the ‘solitarist’ approach (p. xii) to human identity which sees humans as members of one group, defined by civilisation or religion - thus ethnic group (his exclusion of language as an identity marker is a considerable omission, but can be explained by the focus of the book on the sectarian violence rather than minority conflicts which is a more ‘Western’ concept). According to Sen, the ‘solitarist’ view ‘miniaturizes’ human beings by denying them their other identities, i.e. gender, hobbies, intellectual beliefs, profession, and thus diminishing a number of ways in which people relate to one another. We must agree with Sen that all current conflicts are rooted in the ‘illusion of unique and choiceless identity’ (p.xv.) and that he is probably right when he says that the hope of harmony in the contemporary world lies in a clearer understanding of the pluralities of human identity.

One is inclined to also agree that people have a choice to decide on priorities among their many identities. However, this is where the problem with Sen’s analysis lies. His is a work of a liberal philosopher whose moral concerns may include the desire for humanity to exercise the freedom of reasoning and who is deeply familiar with a sense of lingering injustice and ignorance that it spawns, but who at the same time refuses to accept that paradoxically, reason may not be the priority of those who so desperately need it. Moreover, in order to choose an identity one must in the first place have a number of satisfying identities to choose from. What if a person lacks such a choice, what if the choices made turn out to be disappointing at best and dangerous at worse, what if the freedom of choice is denied by the regime? What other choices than a Sunni, Shia or Kurd can we expect from Iraqi citizens after their state has been destroyed, first by a tyrannical regime and then by a foreign intervention, whilst there is no replacement as yet to speak of? Is it not the fact that political capital of ethnic identity is precisely in the illusion of familiarity and solidarity?

The book offers an elegant and undisputable analysis why the solidarity based on one single identity is a weak substitute for the grandeur of reason and choice. On the other hand, the book ends where it should have begun. The answer we are looking for is not that such an identity is a fallacy – we know that. At some point and it is hopelessly late already we must be able to answer what kind of other solidarity can be forged that offers identity meaningful enough to fulfil the sense of uniqueness without the exclusion of others. Sen's appeal to reason will not do the trick, not for a while yet. Whilst we are conflating culture and politics, politically motivated identity-driven violence remains the dark side of humanity, because as Sen rightly remarks: 'the connection between cultural bigotry and political tyranny is very close' (p.105).

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POCTA ROMANOWI INGARDENOWI

Roman Ingarden i dążenia fenomenologów. W 110. rocznice urodzin Profesora. Materiały pokonferencyjne przygotowane pod redakcją Czesława Głombika. (Roman Ingarden a snahy fenomenológov. Pri príležitosti 110. výročia profesorových narodenín. Zborník z konferencie na vydanie pripravil Czesław Głombik). Katowice: Gnome 2006, 144 s.

Publikácie je zborníkom z konferencie, ktorá sa konala v novembri 2003 na pôde Sliezskej univerzity v Katoviciach na počesť hlavného predstaviteľa fenomenológie v Poľsku R. Ingardena (1893 –1970). Pozostáva z úvodnej state Cz. Głombika, vedúceho Katedry dejín novovekej a súčasnej filozofie na Sliezskej univerzite (*O neznámej katovickkej epizóde Romana Ingardena a o premenách fenomenologického myslenia*), prítacného príhovoru J. Bańku, dekana Fakulty spoločenských vied, desiatich konferenčných príspevkov a piatich zaslaných príspevkov, venovaných rôznym aspektom (ontológia, axiológia, psychológia, literárna veda, filozofia jazyka, filozofia vedy) tohto u nás stále nedoceneného filozofa.

Voľba Katovic nebola náhodná, keďže práve tam si Ingarden našiel po vojne prvé zamestnanie. Blok konferenčných príspevkov otvára A. Połtawski, emeritovaný profesor Varšavskej univerzity: *Filozofická dráha Romana Ingardena medzi analytickou filozofiou vedomia a personálnym svetom*. Konkrétnejšie, táto dráha krakovského filozofa sa mu javí ako dráma založená na napätí medzi analytikou vnímania v duchu britského empirizmu a intersubjektivitou. Zároveň je to kombinácia dvoch prístupov k filozofii: atomizujúceho, statického a reduktívneho na jednej strane a dynamického, celostného a kontextuálneho na strane druhej.

A. Węgrzecki, vedúci Katedry filozofie Ekonomickej akadémie v Krakove, sa podujal