

rethinking identity in a multicultural world

amartya sen's proposal for peace

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Abstract

In a world where our neighbors are largely different than ourselves, the commandment to love our neighbors becomes very difficult to do. In fact, we have largely failed to do so and violence in the form of religious or ethnic strife continues to be one of today's most pressing global issues. Efforts at brokering peace have remained largely ineffective because of the conceptual straightjacket of seeing people primarily in terms of a singular belligerent identity defined along religious or civilizational lines. Seeing the world in terms of disparate civilizations makes the world a much more flammable place than it need be even before the question of a clash is even raised. Misguided theory exacerbates the conflict as they are effectively used by proficient artisans of terror to promote fundamentalism and bigotry. It also forces political leaders to respond to these threats through redefining a person's religious identity in largely political terms. As a response to this crude conceptualization, Amartya Sen proposes that we should start seeing people for the multifaceted beings that they are. Peace lies in the recognition that we human beings are not only much the same but that we are also diversely different. The recognition of the plurality of our identities will enable us to cut across the limitations imposed by a hardened line of classification and give emphasis to the priority of freedom and reason in weighing the claims that our different identities make on us. The challenge of fostering peace and understanding in a multicultural world require that our educational systems be able to cultivate identity-sensitive reasoning especially among the young.

Keywords

Amartya Sen, multiculturalism, peace, identity, development



Introduction

The Bible says that we ought to love our neighbors just as we love ourselves.¹ However, in an increasingly interconnected world, this exhortation poses more of a challenge as our neighbors no longer pertain solely to people who share the same religion, culture, ethnicity and economic class, among other identities, as us.² Given the extent of cross-cultural interactions due to vast improvements in technology, the challenge of multiculturalism now comes to the fore. Regrettably, the world has in large part failed to face this challenge positively. Religious and ethnic violence continue to be one of the major issues in the world. While admirable efforts exist to make the world a more peaceful and hospitable place for people sharing diverse backgrounds, they often remain ineffective or worse, backfire. This is because such efforts are hampered by the dominant conceptual framework which severely limits our understanding of social identity. This is true not only of social theoreticians but also for political leaders, army generals, media, and even the layperson. Unless we break free from our reductive understanding of identity which makes us see persons as belonging solely to one particular group instead of being the multifaceted beings that they are, the prospects of peace in a world as diverse as ours will continue to remain utopian.

In order to better explain how “the reductionism of high theory can make a major contribution, often inadvertently to the violence of low politics”³ and advance a more promising proposal for addressing these issues related to identity-related violence, I will give recourse to the thought of Amartya Sen in his book, *Identity and Violence*. This paper will be divided into four parts. First, I will give a brief introduction as to what I refer to when I talk about identity and lay the groundwork for the importance of talking about it. Second, I will discuss the two dominant theories of contemporary analysis for understanding identity which Sen criticizes, namely, 1) Identity Disregard and 2) Singular Affiliation. The third part will expound on Sen’s proposal for a nuanced understanding of identity and the priority of reason and freedom in deciding the weight of the claims of that these identities make upon us. The last part will contain a reflection on how we can improve our educational systems to incorporate a more faithful understanding of identity and the importance of hospitality and understanding in a multicultural world.

¹ Matthew 22:39

² Amartya Kumar Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 149.

³ *Ibid.*, xvi.

What is Identity?

When I ask the question, "Who are you?" the common answer I will get will be a name such as "I am Ana." Pushing the question further, I can ask the same person to fill out a bio-data form containing fields such as nationality, civil status, gender, religion, etc., and then ask if they are indeed the person that the form describes. While most will find it easy to answer affirmatively, a person may, upon further reflection, answer negatively when asked if one is indeed "Ms. So-and-So" without necessarily falsifying information.⁴ This is an instance when an individual recognizes that she transcends being the summation of the identities that he or she possesses. But despite the irreducibility of one's identity with a summation of one's characteristics or affiliations, there is also merit with focusing our attention on the proper extent and consequences of understanding our personal identity in terms of the interplay of the identities that we share with others of a particular group (social identity).⁵ This is especially true with regard to socio-political matters as macro-level policy-making requires a certain degree of abstraction from the particularities of all the individuals concerned.

With the emergence of the notion of multiculturalism in contemporary times and the looming threat of group-identity-related violence, be it ethnic or religious, there is a pressing need to find the proper balance between abstraction and faithfulness to experience. Political efforts in the past decades have failed because the prescriptions put forth are grounded on reductionist understandings of the human person. These misguided abstractions became the founding assumptions of the social sciences that led to the implementation of destructive policies. Due to the failure of these policies in promoting peace, there is a strong need to re-conceptualize our understanding of social identity and its relation to how people act.

Philosophy as the guardian of reason is tasked precisely with examining the very foundations of all the other fields. As such, this work will begin with a philosophical reflection on the conceptual underpinnings of the two dominant modes of understanding identity.

⁴ Gabriel Marcel, "Primary and Secondary Reflection: The Existential Fulcrum," in *Philosophy of Man: Selected Readings*, 2nd ed., ed. Manuel B. Dy, Jr (Goodwill Trading Co., Inc., Makati, 2001), 76.

⁵ Sen, "Identity and Violence," xii.

Two Reductionist Theories of Identity

1) Identity Disregard

"It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves not to their humanity, but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities, but of their advantages."⁶

Being one of the most famous lines in Adam Smith's *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, this statement is one of the most misunderstood sentiments of Smith. In any introductory course on economics, the first thing that is taught is about the assumptions that economics is founded on. Chief among these is the claim that man is rational. However, classical economics' definition of "rationality" is very rigid and resounds more with the way classical Utilitarians understand the human psyche. For them, the rational individual is one who maximizes pleasure and minimizes pain through narrowly self-interested behavior. The only motivation that people (*homo economicus*) have to do something is if it is in their self-interest to do so.⁷ No other considerations come into play in deciding which action to take except for maximizing utility. Any sense of identity with others and the claims that such identities make in terms of a person's values are outside the purview of the cost-benefit analysis in the rational agent's mind.⁸ As such, paragons of virtue such as Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa, and Nelson Mandela are bigger idiots than the rest of us because they fail to act in a self-interested manner and give more priority to the commitments that their identities and corresponding belief systems make upon them.⁹

Despite the continued dominance of such assumptions in mainstream economic theorizing, challenges have arisen to this clearly reductionist assumption of rationality such as the emergence of Behavioral Economics. However, the rejection of the thesis of purely self-interested behavior does not immediately mean that one's decision-making is influenced by a sense of shared identity.¹⁰ It is indeed possible to have other considerations that affect behavior such as belief in "norms of acceptable conduct, or by

⁶ Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations: Representative Selections*, ed. Bruce Mazlish (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2002), 15.

⁷ Sen, "Identity and Violence," 21.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 20

⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

her sense of duty . . . toward others with whom one does not identify in any *obvious* sense."¹¹

Despite this, there is a strong case for the complex role that identity plays in affecting an individual's decision-making. As Sen argues, identity "can be a source not merely of pride and joy, but also of strength and confidence" as has been proven by the emergence of the literature on social capital and communitarian thinking.¹² Also, a sense of shared identity with others provides us with a more intuitive motivation to go beyond self-centeredness and even familial prejudice and lead us towards a sense of solidarity with more abstract collectivities such as the nation. Finally, the displacement of modern philosophy's Cartesian Cogito and/or Kant's Transcendental Ego due to the emergence of the contemporary understanding of *Dasein's* situatedness forces us to give due recognition to the effects of historicity in forming our perspectives. This work attempts to give a more concrete rendering of what constitutes our historicity by looking at it through the lens of our different social identities where each identity is a rich and resilient source of beliefs, norms, and values.

As a caveat, however, not all identities that are shared with other people automatically generate solidarity or become a rich source of values. This is so for two reasons. First, the capacity of a shared identity to do so depends largely on the social context involved. Sen gives the examples of people who wear size 8 shoes and people born between nine and ten in the morning. Unless there is reasonable ground to give importance to these identities, say people born in this particular hour are more resilient to certain diseases, these identities will remain rather trivial.¹³ Nevertheless, some shared identities that do not intuitively make sense may have real effects as a result of social construction. Bourdieu's example of competitive examinations where the 300th placer is

¹¹ Ibid., 23; italics mine. Kant's Humanity-as-End formulation of the Categorical Imperative can be seen as one instance of a duty that people have regardless if they identify with the other in question. Of course, the argument can be made that being human is also an identity that we have but often, identities matter only when they are put in contrast with another identity. Because the context that we are pertaining to assumes that we are speaking solely of human beings, I will exclude "being human" as an identity as it is the upper limit of our abstraction. This is a methodological decision on my part but it is entirely possible to move the upper limit of abstraction to a much wider scope such as "sentience" or the "capacity for suffering" in order to accommodate the criticisms of "speciesism." For more information, see the essays under the section "Across the Species Barrier" in Peter Singer, *Writings on an Ethical Life* (New York: The Ecco Press, 2000), 21-86.

¹² Sen, "Identity and Violence," 1.

¹³ Ibid., 26-27.

markedly distinguished from the 301st is one such instance.¹⁴ In both cases, the capacity of an affiliation to generate a sense of shared identity depends also on the extent to which the individual appropriates a historically given identity. Going back to the third of Ricoeur's three hermeneutic circles for understanding religious identity, when an affiliation that started as an accident becomes transformed into destiny through ongoing choice, then that identity will weigh more than his other non-appropriated identities.¹⁵ Second, it is also not automatic that sharing a common identity with another person will determine all the decisions that that person will make when this other person is involved. For example, if a Filipino employer were to choose a Filipino candidate as opposed to a Chinese candidate without first examining their relevant qualifications, then that employer forfeits the use of practical reason and operates solely on nepotism. While identities do indeed generate a strong sense of "within group-solidarity," favoritism for people belonging to the same group will undermine the exercise of merit-based values that marginalizes outsiders which in turn may lead to "between-group discord."¹⁶

2) Singular Affiliation

Contrary to claiming that identity does not matter at all, the dominant theory of singular affiliation affirms the importance of identity and the role that it plays in our decision-making. However, adherents of the singular-affiliation theory of identity have a limited understanding of what identity consists of because they see any person as belonging solely to one group. These groupings are defined primarily in terms of religion, culture, or ethnicity. A more refined version of the perspective admits the plurality of identities of any single person but still insists (1) upon the pre-eminence of one collectivity over all other categories and (2) the lack of choice with regard to deciding on the relative importance of one's different membership categories.¹⁷ Two variants of this refined version of singular affiliation theory are Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* and a more geographically condensed clash of local (ethnic) populations.

¹⁴ Ibid., 27.

¹⁵ Paul Ricoeur, "Experience and Language in Religious Discourse," in *Phenomenology and the 'Theological Turn'*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky and Thomas A. Carlson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 135.

¹⁶ Sen, "Identity and Violence," 2-3.

¹⁷ Ibid., 25.

Partitioning the World

According to Samuel Huntington, the world can be divided up into smaller civilizations such as “the Western world,” “the Islamic World,” “the Hindu World,” and “the Buddhist World,” among others.¹⁸ These civilizations relate to each other in a particular way, with more emphasis being placed on the apparent conflict between “Western” and “Islamic” civilizations.¹⁹ Each person is seen solely as a member of one of these worlds. The relation between two persons belonging to different civilizations is necessarily defined by the relation between the civilizations which they belong to.²⁰ Thus if James belongs to the “Western” world and Amir belongs to the “Islamic” world and the Western and Islamic worlds are necessarily belligerent to one another, then James and Amir must also be necessarily belligerent to one another.

The same logic is followed by the thesis of a clash between ethnic groups. The only difference is that instead of basing the grouping on civilizational (religious) lines, the criteria used for distinction is the ethnic group to which one belongs. Individuals are seen primarily through their ethnic identities and these identities are believed to naturally breed enmity toward each other such as the relationship between Hutus and Tutsis, Serbs and Albanians, Tamils and Sinhalese.²¹

There are as many possible variants of this partitioning approach as there are identities shared with others but they all follow the same fragmentary logic of (1) dividing the world into neatly packaged groups who inevitably must take arms against one another and (2) seeing the people who are part of these groups solely in terms of this particular and overarching identity to the exclusion of all his other identities and value systems. People are thus seen as one-dimensional beings who are subservient to the claims that a specific identity they have makes upon them. They lack the freedom to see themselves as a member of different groups and having the capacity to weigh which of their relevant identities they should take into consideration in making practical decisions. People’s decisions across a lifetime are, as it were, determined by a particular identity that they have and it is their destiny to live this way.

¹⁸ Ibid., 41. Sen obtains these classifications from Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

¹⁹ Sen, “Identity and Violence,” 40.

²⁰ Ibid., 41.

²¹ Ibid., 43.

The Catholic Vote on the RH Bill

While these illustrations may be rather off-tangent to the main point being argued by Sen as to the relation between identity and violence, I find these examples as vivid illustrations of the same underlying presupposition of understanding identity. When asked why he voted No for the passage of the Reproductive Health Bill, Rep. Augusto Syjuco gave the following reason:

"I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, our Lord. Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary. Suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, dead and buried: He descended into hell. The third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost. I believe in the holy Catholic church: the communion of saints. The forgiveness of sins. The resurrection of the body. And the life everlasting. Amen."²²

Based on the statement, Rep. Augusto Syjuco, a staunch Catholic, believes that his Catholic identity should be the basis for his voting on an important social issue. However, I find it difficult to understand why he gave the Apostle's Creed as his justification for such an important issue. It seems as though no actual reasoning process happened in deciding his vote, just blind adherence to his interpretation of what his Catholic faith requires of him. His interpretation, however, is not purely subjective, but is largely affected by how his particularly religious community (conservative Catholic bloc) interprets the commandments of their faith.

Contrary to Rep. Syjuco who seemingly grounded his answer on an unquestioned understanding of his religious identity, Rep. Zeny Marana gave the following justification for voting Yes to the RH bill, "The Lord commands, 'If you love me, you should love your fellow people.' So I am for the RH Bill."²³

In a way, her justification is similar to Rep. Syjuco in that it was based largely on the beliefs that stem from her Catholic identity. However, they differ in terms of their interpretation of what their faith demands of them. Whereas the former was largely conservative, Rep. Marana's response carries with it the spirit of Vatican II and Liberation Theology's emphasis of being in solidarity with the poor and marginalized.

²² "RH Bill Voting: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly," Roots of Health, last modified December 12, 2012, accessed March 17, 2015, <http://rootsofhealth.org/2012/12/rh-bill-voting-the-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly/>.

²³ Ibid.

Nonetheless, both representatives based their decision on what they believe to be the claim that their religious identity makes upon them. These examples illustrate the overarching importance of one particular identity over all others. These representatives see themselves primarily in terms of their religious identity and act solely based on the claims that these identities make upon them which is precisely what the theory of singular affiliation describes. If we were to alter the circumstances and made it a vote for a religious crusade against people from different belief systems and political leaders based their justifications solely on how they interpret the demands of their religion, then there is a strong case for criticizing their decisions.

Sen raises the following poignant criticisms when we base political decisions on religious beliefs. First, when political decisions are based on largely religious terms, the nature of the discussions that would ensue in convincing political leaders to vote otherwise would require convincing them of a different interpretation of what their religion demands. Doing so, however, would mean that religious identity would be defined in largely political terms.²⁴ However, interpreting religious beliefs is beyond the purview of the State and is a matter which the particular religious community involved should decide on. For the State to intrude upon how a religious community should interpret their faith would be a gross violation of the separation between Church and State. Second, as a consequence of relying exclusively on religious beliefs for decisions affecting the public sphere, we in effect give stronger political power to religious authorities.²⁵ In a world where some religious authorities are extreme fundamentalists, strengthening the political influence of religious authorities may just accelerate our return to the intolerant medieval ages. Furthermore, the more that political power is concentrated in the hands of religious authorities, the lesser the influence that civil society groups founded on non-religious, political valuations will have. Weakening these sectors when they are arguably one of the stronger influences in promoting peace and hospitality in a multicultural society is highly counter-productive.²⁶ Finally, I find it problematic that a politician who belongs to the majority religion in the Philippines bases their vote on their particular religious beliefs when the issue at hand would affect not only the majority religious group to which he belongs but also people from other, minority religious groups who are within the jurisdiction of the State. It is discriminating against our Muslim and Indigenous brothers and sisters that the laws that would affect them are being decided upon based primarily on the religious beliefs of the dominant religious group in the country.

²⁴ Sen, "Identity and Violence," 14.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 77-78.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, xvi, 77-78.

The Logical Structure of Singular Affiliation

Based on the aforementioned, I present the logical structure of the thought process behind singular affiliation. Instead of using the RH Bill issue, I would concentrate on the issue of religious fundamentalism, specifically, the supposed conflict with the "Western, Christian" world and the "Islamic" World. Since this is a logical argument, it is possible to substitute any particular religion or even ethnic group and the same conclusion will still follow. The thought process is as follows:

X is a Muslim. He has no other relevant identities.

Y is a Christian. I have no other relevant identities.

Muslims must kill Christians.

X is a Muslim so I must kill Christians.

X must kill Y because he is a Christian.

Statements (1) and (2) form the core of the thesis of singular affiliation. Statement (3) is an interpretation of the political demands that a religious community makes upon an individual. Contemporary efforts for pursuing peace have largely remained ineffective if not counter-productive because they are constrained by the same assumptions [statements (1) and (2)]. Because this conceptual straightjacket is assumed, efforts have been limited to redefining the content of statement (3) such as emphasizing that "Islam is a peaceful religion" and the importance of fostering "amity between civilizations."²⁷ This is problematic because assuming that statements (1) and (2) are true unintentionally makes the world a more flammable well before we proceed to statement (3). Misguided theory not only bolsters uncomplicated bigotry but it also serves as an effective ideological tool for converting otherwise peaceful human beings into mindless killing machines in the hands of "proficient artisans of terror".²⁸ The martial art of fostering violence follows the simple reductionist logic of making people believe in the veracity of statements (1) to (2) and imposing an intolerant interpretation to be the content of statement (3). To use Sen's words as he reflects on the transformation of Indians into Hindus and Muslims and the ensuing violence that he witnessed as a child,

²⁷ Ibid., xvi, 12, 14.

²⁸ Ibid., 2, 44.

Many-sided persons were seen, through the hazy lenses of sectarian singularity, as having exactly one identity each, linked with ... religious ethnicity [whether one practiced one's religion did not matter].²⁹

This limited understanding of oneself and others was the product of being led to turn that sense of self-understanding into a murderous instrument through (1) ignoring the relevance of all other affiliations and associations, and (2) redefining the demands of the "sole" identity in a particularly belligerent form.³⁰

For as long the theory of singular affiliation holds dominance and divisive theories of a clash between civilizations, ethnicities, classes, etc. remain as the primary way of seeing the world, we will unknowingly foster "a sense of inevitability about some allegedly unique and belligerent identity that we are supposed to have and which makes extensive [and often, disagreeable] demands on us."³¹ The prospects of peace lie in breaking out of the conceptual straightjacket of reducing multifaceted beings into their singular affiliations.

The Fragmentary Logic of Partitioning the World

Before offering a counter-proposal, I would first like to explore the reason why theories of segregation along different grouping continue to hold sway.

First and foremost, the reason is practical. People are complex creatures but theorizing on a macro-level requires a certain level of abstraction wherein we prescind from the particulars. Seeing people in terms of singular identities simplifies the assumptions that we have to make.

The second lies in the formal literature's recognition that culture and history does indeed matter to understanding why people behave the way they do and why different places in the world experience different levels of development.³² The "culture hypothesis" has indeed gained ground in explaining the relationship between culture and social development ever since Max Weber pioneering work on Protestant Ethic and Capitalism.

While Sen agrees that the world was right when it said that culture matters, he warns us that we should not forget the question as to "[h]ow does culture matter?"³³ Regrettably, social theorists have fallen into the trap of another kind of reductionism when they claimed that culture is the sole determinant of how an individual behaves and is the primary reason why some nations are developed and why some are not. This form of

²⁹ Ibid., 172.

³⁰ Ibid., 176.

³¹ Ibid., xiii.

³² Ibid., 106-107.

³³ Ibid., 103.

"cultural determinism" has a strong appeal as it draws from an idealized understanding of cultural identity as presented in textbook stereotypes, a selected reading of history, and the cultural bigotry of the authors who write history. Overarching conclusions are easily drawn from a selectively chosen set of references and a misguided understanding of the nature of culture. Huntington's civilizational clash and its lesser variants are based primarily on the conceptual assumption of seeing the world as a collection of (a) strictly partitioned, (b) highly insular, (c) and internally homogenous sub-groupings.³⁴ The appalling miniaturization of people into boxes contributes to strengthening the "us" vs "them" dialectic which unintentionally fans the flames of war.

As a response, Sen lays out some major criticisms to Huntington's thesis and provides us with empirical cases as support. First, he claims that there is great internal variation to any single culture.³⁵ Whereas Huntington describes India as a "Hindu civilization," Sen argues that India has more Muslims than most countries in the "Muslim world." This does not yet include the presence of Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, agnostics, atheists, Christians, Jews, Parsees, etc."³⁶ Also, Huntington claims that the "Hindu World" is a religious civilization whereas the "Western World" is characterized primarily by their beliefs in democracy, individual freedom, religious tolerance, and science and technology. In response, Sen argues that the Indian Civilization in fact has the largest agnostic tradition in the world.³⁷ Next, with regard to the often repeated claim that liberal-democratic values and science and technology is an uniquely Western heritage, he lays out two further criticisms. First, he says that such claims are based on a limited reading of world history. If we think about the essence of democracy as public reasoning and tolerance, he argues that it was not only practiced in Ancient Greece and preached during the Enlightenment, but was also very much present in the Great Eastern traditions such as in Ashoka's India, Japan, Akbar and Caliph Abd al-Rahman III of Cordova's Middle East, and Nelson Mandela's Africa.³⁸ Second, these claims are founded upon the illusion of insularity among cultures.³⁹ If one looks at how the scientific revolution actually came to be, we cannot discount the importance of the contributions that East had made. The scientific revolution that we have come to recognize as a distinctly Western thing is in fact a product of the transmission of knowledge (mathematics, science, etc.) from the East (China, Arabia, Iran, India, Buddhist technologists] to the West in the medieval period.⁴⁰ To briefly summarize,

³⁴ Ibid., 10-11.

³⁵ Ibid., 45-46.

³⁶ Ibid., 47-48.

³⁷ Ibid., 35.

³⁸ Ibid., 53-54.

³⁹ Ibid., 45-46.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 56-57, 68-70.

Sen states that “[t]he foggy perception of global history yields an astonishingly limited view of each culture, including an oddly parochial reading of Western Civilization.”⁴¹

In addition, Sen argues that while culture does indeed matter, it should not be seen as the sole determinant of behavior, thinking, and social predicaments.⁴² Culture operates within a much broader framework. It interacts with other factors such as class, race, gender, profession, politics, among others.⁴³ In particular, cultural attitudes affect social development through their interaction with the institutions that govern society.⁴⁴ Thus, singling out cultural attributes as the primary reason why certain events occur, such as the great Irish famine, the poverty of Africa and Latin America compared to South Korea, and the seeming ungovernability of Filipinos by formal systems of democracy, is not only descriptively false but also fosters bigotry among the well-placed and fatalism for the misfortunate ones.⁴⁵ Furthermore, it is important to stop seeing culture as a static element and start seeing it as a dynamic interplay that continually reinterprets itself through years and years of discussion and public policy. Finally, the extent of cultural interactions due to globalization may imply that what we consider local culture may in fact be a result of decades of exposure and appropriation of foreign cultures as is the case with many culinary dishes, music, art, and films.⁴⁶ All these criticisms point to the untenability of the notion that culture is static, internally homogenous, insular, and the sole determinant of individual behavior and social development.

The Play of Plural Identities

After laying out the limitations of the two dominant notions of identity, I proceed with giving an exposition of Sen’s proposal for understanding identity and how it can enable us to solve the problems of violence and other identity-related issues. To begin, I would like to quote Sen’s answer to the question “Who am I?,”

I can be, at the same time, an Asian, an Indian citizen, a Bengali with Bangladeshi ancestry, an American or British resident, an economist, a dabbler in philosophy,

⁴¹ Ibid., 58.

⁴² Ibid., 112.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty* (New York: Crown Business, 2012), 57.

⁴⁵ See Sen, “Identity and Violence,” 105-107; Acemoglu and Robinson, “Why Nations Fail?,” 56-63; Agustin Martin G. Rodriguez, *Governing the Other: Exploring the Discourse of Democracy in a Multiverse of Reason* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2009), 2.

⁴⁶ Sen, “Identity and Violence,” 113.

an author, a Sanskritist, a strong believer in secularism and democracy, a man, a feminist, a heterosexual, a defender of gay and lesbian rights, with a nonreligious lifestyle, from a Hindu background, a non-Brahmin, and a nonbeliever in an afterlife ... and a "before-life" as well.⁴⁷

For Sen, identity is linked to an understanding of himself as being a member of all these different groups at the same time.⁴⁸ He believes not only that people see themselves as members of different groups but more importantly, that they have good reason to see themselves as such.⁴⁹ For him,

A person's citizenship, residence, geographic origin, gender, class, politics, profession, employment, food habits, sports interests, taste in music, social commitments, etc., make us members of a variety of groups.⁵⁰

All these identities make claims upon a person. However, what these identities claim can run into conflict with one another. As seen in the previous section, instead of weighing the demands of these competing claims, there is a predominant belief that religious or ethnic identity takes absolute precedence over all the other claims. In response to this, Sen asserts that

A person's religion need not be his or her all-encompassing and exclusive identity. In particular, Islam [Christianity], as a religion, does not obliterate responsible choice for Muslims [Christians] in many spheres of life. Indeed, it is possible for one Muslim [Christian] to take a confrontational [pro-life] view and another to be thoroughly tolerant of heterodoxy [pro-choice] without either of them ceasing to be a Muslim [Christian] for that reason alone.

He continues by saying that,

Muslims [Christians], like all other people in the world, have many different pursuits, and not all of their priorities and values need be placed within their singular identity of being Islamic [Christian].⁵¹

Thus, for Sen, there is no such thing as an overarching identity that completely determines all the decisions in a person's life.⁵² Contrary to what many propagandists,

⁴⁷ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁸ Ibid., xii, 4-5.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 15.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 4-5.

⁵¹ Ibid., 14.

ideologues, and religious leaders claim, religious identity and/or ethnicity does not resolve all of life's questions for us, especially not those pertaining to our social and political conduct and actions.⁵³ People not just their religious affiliation nor their ethnicity no matter how much they choose to appropriate them. They are dynamic personas who seek to actualize themselves through concrete action by weighing the different valuations of each of their relevant identities.⁵⁴

The Logic of Plural Identities

In the exercise of practical reason, a person must ask himself which of his identities are relevant and which will have the stronger weight given the circumstances.⁵⁵ While often done implicitly, certain situations exist when we must decide explicitly as is the case with E.M. Foster when he said, "[I]f I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country."⁵⁶

One such situation leads us back to the issue of the RH Bill. Whereas the previous two examples based their justification on their interpretation of what their religious faith demands of them, Rep. Biazon's answer gives us an illuminating example of when another identity of ours may take precedence over our religious identity. According to him, he voted yes for the RH Bill because, "[Although] I am a Catholic. The poor demand this national policy be adopted. I am mandated to listen to our people."⁵⁷

Without denying the importance of his religious identity, he recognizes that his identity as a public servant makes a heavier claim on him in this instance. The responsibility of being a public servant mandated to listen to the demands of the people weighs more than the demands of his religious identity. Instead of deciding based solely on one identity, he uses his freedom to reason out which of his relevant identities have a heavier claim for this decision. Outlining the logical structure of the decision procedure involved, we would have the following:

⁵² Ibid., 65.

⁵³ Ibid., 67.

⁵⁴ For a description of what a persona is according to the thought of Max Scheler, see Agustin Martin G. Rodriguez, *Pag-ibig ang Katwiran ng Kasaysayan: Tadhana at Kapalaran ng Kasaysayan ni Max Scheler* (Office of Research and Publications, Loyola Schools, Ateneo de Manila University: Quezon, 2008), 20-22.

⁵⁵ Sen, "Identity and Violence," 19,29.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 30.

⁵⁷ "RH Bill Voting: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly," Roots of Health, last modified December 12, 2012, accessed March 17, 2015, <http://rootsofhealth.org/2012/12/rh-bill-voting-the-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly/>.

- (1') He is a member of multiple groups and each of these identities makes claims upon him.
- (2') For this particular decision, he has to decide which are his relevant identities.
- (3') He will weigh the claims that these identities make upon him and base his decision on the exercise of practical reason.
- (4') He chose to give more importance to his identity as a public servant than being a Christian for this particular decision.
- (5') He voted yes.

Looking at statements (1') to (3'), we can see that they are the assumptions that Biazon makes in deciding for this particular issue. Statements (4') and (5') are the result of the exercise of practical reason. Being a logical argument, we can change the contents of the statements. If the issue was about deciding whether to engage in a war of extermination against another religion or ethnicity, then only the specifics of statement (2') and the entire content of statements (4') and (5') will change. This is because statements (1') to (3') serve as the foundational assumptions of a more faithful understanding of human identity. These assumptions are in fact the foundational supports of Sen's nuanced understanding of human identity. Being free from the conceptual straightjacket of singular affiliation, it is also free from the necessity of having to reinterpret religious or ethnic identity in largely political terms. Moreover, such a conceptualization does not [un/intentionally] make the world a much more flammable place as it does not partition the world into distinct groups defined in terms of an "us" vs "them". Instead of downplaying complexity for the sake of simplifying assumptions, Sen's theory recognizes the importance of being faithful to the multifaceted nature of human identity and the claims that it makes on us for every day decision-making. As a consequence, he argues for the priority of freedom and reason in determining our loyalties and priorities based on the different claims that being part of certain groups makes on us.⁵⁸

Going back to Sen's primary concern between identity-based thinking and achieving peace, he claims that peace lies

in the recognition of the plurality of our affiliations and in the use of reasoning as common inhabitants of a wide world, rather than making us into inmates rigidly incarcerated in little containers. What we need, above all, is a clear-headed understanding of the importance of the freedom that we can have in determining our priorities.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Sen, "Identity and Violence," 5.

⁵⁹ Ibid, xvii.

This is consistent with his larger approach to development where development lies in the expansion of people's substantive freedom to lead the lives they value and have reason to value.⁶⁰

Identity-Based Social Issues

To illustrate how his nuanced understanding of human identity actually is relevant to policy making, he explores several issues in different chapters in the book. The following is a brief exposition of these issues and his responses.

First, with regard to the issue of purist politics such as the "Hindutva" movement and the issue of religious fundamentalism, Sen argues for the importance of conceptually distinguishing between (1) The various affiliations and loyalties a person who happens to be a Muslim [Hindu] has and; (2) His or her Islamic [Hindu] Identity in particular.⁶¹

Instead of conflating religious and/or ethnic identity with socio-political beliefs, he argues for the need of delineating between the two because one's socio-political beliefs such as being intolerant or engaging in terrorism cannot serve as grounds for excommunication.⁶² Instead of concentrating their efforts at redefining Islam and extending the reach of religion beyond its proper borders, a much more effective way for fostering peace is to fight terrorists' propaganda which says that people should see themselves solely in terms of a singular, belligerent identity.⁶³

Second, Sen devotes an entire chapter to a discussion of what he calls the "dialectics of the colonized mind." He describes this phenomenon as a situation wherein formerly colonized peoples "[see themselves] primarily as someone who (or whose ancestors) have been misrepresented, or treated badly, by colonialists, no matter how true that identification may be."⁶⁴ Often, this takes the form of understanding oneself as the West's "Other" and leads to the formation of what he calls "reactive self-perception."⁶⁵ This causes needless hostility to global ideas (democracy, science and technology, medicine - vaccination), due to their being stigmatized as essentially "Western," when such ideas would otherwise help greatly in the expansion of people's freedoms.⁶⁶ Also, it makes for a misguided understanding of one's own historical identity in so far as one

⁶⁰ Ibid., 150. For a detailed exposition of Sen's approach to development, see Amartya Kumar Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Knopf, 1999), 3.

⁶¹ Sen, "Identity and Violence," 61.

⁶² Ibid., 80-82.

⁶³ Ibid., 83.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 88-89

⁶⁵ Ibid., 91.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 89.

downplays one's achievements in fields labelled as "Western" such as material wealth and science and technology and leads to an exclusive focus on the "Eastern" fields such as spirituality and filial piety.⁶⁷ While there is merit in the project of liberating a nation from the vestiges of (neo)-colonialism, I think it important that we stop seeing ourselves primarily as victims of our colonizers. Defining ourselves as our colonizers' "Other" would only make us slaves whose projects are always a response to our past instead of enabling us to form a more proactive national identity.

Third, with regard to the issue of cultural freedom, Sen argues for the need to distinguish between *cultural liberty* and that of *valuing cultural conservation*.⁶⁸ The former refers to the freedom to either preserve or change priorities on the basis of further reflection and the liberty to question blind adherence to tradition when other priorities demand our attention.⁶⁹ The latter refers to the celebration and preservation of the cultural practices that constitute one's cultural inheritance.⁷⁰ In contemporary times, emphasis is placed on valuing cultural conservation due to the increasing influx of minority groups in foreign countries to the point where blind adherence to such cultural norms is encouraged. Sen finds this problematic as he places a larger value on cultural liberty and the exercise of reason in determining whether one could choose to remain in one's inherited tradition or move, whether by a little or a lot, to another tradition, than cultural conservation. For him, suppressing the right to choose for the sake of cultural preservation, especially among the young, would be a gross violation of their cultural and overall freedom. People must be free to choose for themselves whether to remain or deviate from their inherited cultures. The decision to do so cannot be imposed from the outside by religious and/or tribal leaders or cultural experts. Those who are themselves affected must make their own decisions especially when the situation demands it of them – as is the case when choosing between a traditional lifestyle enmeshed in poverty or shifting to a more modern but materially secure lifestyle.⁷¹

It should be noted, however, that what is meant by (cultural) freedom is not limited to negative freedom. As Nussbaum argues, freedom does not only mean formal freedom under a constitution such as the "right to political participation or the right to free religious exercise" without the corresponding social efforts to develop these intrinsic freedoms through education and public policy.⁷² Cultural freedom is no different from

⁶⁷ Ibid., 90, 93-95.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 113.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 113-114.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 114.

⁷¹ Sen, "Development as Freedom," 31-32.

⁷² Martha Nussbaum, "Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements: Sen and Social Justice," *Feminist Economics* 9, nos. 2-3 (2003): 38-39.

these other freedoms and it is here that the importance of education arises as “unfreedom can result also from a lack of knowledge and understanding of other cultures and of alternative lifestyles.”⁷³

This last point is the anchor of Sen’s criticism as to the United Kingdom’s policy of supporting the propagation of faith-based (Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Christian) schools. While these schools do not necessarily foster an inclination for religious fundamentalism similar to the Pakistani *madrasas*, they unintentionally hamper the capacity of children to decide for themselves as to the relevance of their own various identities as well as the importance of understanding people who hail from different ethnic and religious traditions. When children are segregated at such an early age, they will tend to see the world in terms of groupings of an “us” and “them” instead of a collective “we.” This is the danger of seeing ethnically diverse countries such as Britain as a “federation of communities” rather than as a collectivity of diverse human beings.⁷⁴ When people from different cultures live side-by-side without interacting with one another and think that what they have is an instance of hospitable multiculturalism, they unwittingly develop a sense of alienation among certain groups (immigrants) because what they are actually exhibiting is an example of plural monoculturalism.⁷⁵ It is important that these two phenomena are not confused with one another as it would lead to serious consequences especially when they become the basis of policy-making. As such, different people should not be segregated especially in their formative years as the lack of exposure to other horizons of thinking and living will result to a sense of universality to one’s inherited notions (“common sense”). This sense of universality often leads to intolerance and bigotry of other ways of living and the drive to impose one’s rationality over others.⁷⁶

The Challenges of Education in a Multicultural World

Given the priority of reason and freedom in forming people, especially the young, to lead “examined lives” in a world which requires us to love neighbors who are largely different than ourselves, our educational policies must go beyond preaching a dogmatic understanding of our own particular religious and ethical belief systems (normative education) and a reductionist understanding of ourselves and other people in terms of singular categories. Rather, it must enable us to see ourselves and others for the

⁷³ Sen, “Identity and Violence,” 117.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 117-118.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 157.

⁷⁶ For an exposition of the notion of “common sense” and the dangers it poses when people think and assume its universality, see Agustin Martin Rodriguez, *May Laro ang Diskurso ng Katarungan* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2014), 92-97.

multidimensional beings that we are and cultivate the capacity to freely exercise our reason in deciding as to the weights of the claims that our different identities make upon us. This entails the capacity to make explicit which of our particular identities are relevant to the decision at hand as well as clearly defining our interpretation of the claims these identities make. Because interpretation of the demands of normative belief systems is necessary for existential appropriation, special emphasis has to be placed on the kind of history and social studies subjects that we teach for these are the source of our understanding of what it means to be part of a particular group. If our textbooks continue to provide us with unfaithful stereotypes of what it means to be a Filipino (hospitable, *ningas kugon*) for example or what people from other countries are like (Chinese are thrifty, Arabs smell bad) then the prospects for true understanding will remain slim.

Of course, experience is the best teacher and having interactions between children belonging to different ethnic and religious backgrounds will serve as a more effective eye-opener than those taught inside the four walls of the classroom but this does not absolve educators from the responsibility of opening new horizons and fostering the values of hospitality to others. Continuously reminding our students of the perspectival nature of what we believe to be common sensical will better prepare them to be able to live in peace and harmony with others rather than immediately discrediting the rationality of other ways of life and imposing one's normative conceptions of the good in a bigoted fashion. While it is true that it is only an encounter with the otherness of the Other that fully awakens us to the limited nature of our own horizons, education plays a large role in terms of preparing us to be open to this encounter and seeing the value of these other perspectives. Without proper education, an encounter with another may only lead to furthering animosity instead of fostering understanding. Because of this, it is important that the education we receive during our formative years should be able to develop our capacity for compassion and openness to other ways of living. Unless such an important human capability is developed, then our educational systems will have only succeeded in "contributing to the destruction and misery of the world."⁷⁷ Beyond raising technical expertise, the true goal of education is uplifting the moral tenor of reasoning individuals. With the Socratic dictum of "Know thyself" as the primary task of education, Sen says that

education is not just about getting children, even very young ones, immersed in an old, inherited ethos. It is also about helping children to develop the ability to reason about new decisions any grown-up person will have to take. [We have to

⁷⁷ Jiddu Krishnamurti, "Education and the Significance of Life," in *Total Freedom: The Essential Krishnamurti* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), 89.

ask] what would best enhance the capability of the children to live "examined lives" as they grow up in an integrated country.⁷⁸

Conclusion

The prospects of peace in a world divided across different ethnic and religious lines lie precisely in breaking free from the conceptual limitations of seeing ourselves and others in terms of a singular belligerent identity. We have to remember that not only are we all much the same, but we are also *diversely different*.⁷⁹ The recognition of the dynamic nature of our plural identities and the cultivation of reason and freedom in deciding the relative importance of the claims that our identities make on us through identity-sensitive education will serve as the first steps towards making the world a much better place to live in. The path to peace may be a journey of a thousand miles but it all begins with one step. Indeed, the time is ripe to engage with freedom's limitless possibilities.

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⁷⁸ Sen, "Identity and Violence," 160.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, xiv.

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