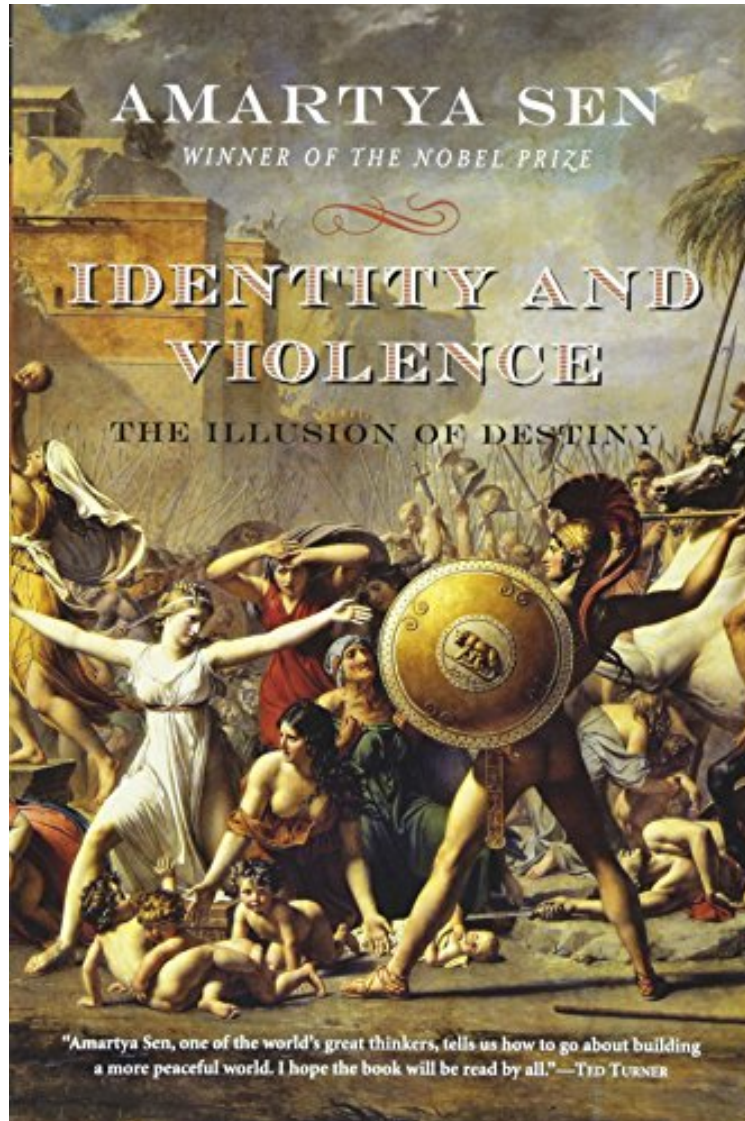


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Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny (Issues of Our Time)

Amartya Sen

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#83283 in Books Amartya Sen 2007-02-17 Original language: English PDF # 1 8.30 x .60 x 5.50l, .43 #File Name: 0393329291240 pages Identity and Violence The Illusion of Destiny Issues of Our Time | File size: 53.Mb

Amartya Sen : Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny (Issues of Our Time) before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny (Issues of Our Time):

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Unfolding the causal link between identity and violence By nafirical 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! 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A must read By Carlos Allende A little longer that it should have been, yes, but quite insightful and an eye opener. This would be a better world if we followed Sen's recommendations of not constraining people to a sole identity. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. This is one of my favorite books of all time By Samar S. Ali 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.

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.

From Publishers Weekly Nobel Prizewinning 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. From Booklist 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 Amartya Sen, one of the world's great thinkers, tells us how to go about building a more peaceful world. I hope the book will be read by all. -- Ted Turner Sen is now Asia's preeminent philosopher of freedom. . . . This is an indispensable book. -- Anwar Ibrahim, former deputy prime minister of Malaysia Amartya Sen, one of the world's great thinkers, tells us how to go about building a more peaceful world. I hope the book will be read by all. -- Ted Turner "Amartya Sen brings to our generation a new and modern vision of how to obtain peace. --George Akerlof, Nobel Laureate in Economics" Sen is now Asia's preeminent philosopher of freedom. . . . This is an indispensable book. --Anwar Ibrahim, former deputy prime minister of Malaysia"