

# NOTES ON AMARTYA SEN'S INTERPRETATION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY\*

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**Abstract:** *In our study, we analyse aspects of Sen's criticism of specific interpretations of cultural identity. We shall see that, in Sen's view, different interpretations of cultural identity can be given. The different ways in which cultural identity is interpreted correspond to different ways of living one's culture; they are connected to different interpretations of religion and religious identity, too. Throughout Sen's inquiry, we shall find the following interpretations of cultural identity:*

- The first interpretation of cultural identity, which corresponds to Sen's own interpretation of cultural identity, considers cultural identities as the result of many components which constantly evolve and have modifications (this might be defined as the flexible, dynamic, and inclusive view of cultural identity).*
- The second interpretation considers cultural identity as rigid, complete, isolated, and given once and for all (this could be defined as the rigid and static conception of cultural identity). The second conception of cultural identity corresponds to the aim of producing people and groups as isolated systems.*

*Sen investigates the psychological mechanisms connected to the rigid interpretation of cultural identity. Individuals can be manipulated through the rigid interpretation of cultural identity. Sen shows that cultural identities can be used to marginalise all those who do not belong to those same cultural identities: this kind of cultural identity is built to divide individuals, groups, peoples, and nations from each other. Cultural identities can be used to create a group which, as such, does not exist at all or is not so homogeneous and uniform as those who plead for this concept of cultural identity aim to make it*

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*appear. The group is created artificially by an artificial cultural identity. The rigid cultural identity of certain sectors of people means the exclusion of other sectors of people. This kind of cultural identity is built to bring about enmity between individuals, groups, nations, countries, and communities: it is thought out to produce hostility from a group towards other groups.*

*Religions and religious identities, too, can be used as weapons if religious identities are interpreted as isolated systems which should not be contaminated by external influences. The concept of cultural identity should not necessarily be religious; nonetheless, we can find in Sen examples of conflicts due to religious identities. A religious identity, too, can be used to exclude all those who do not belong to a specific religious confession. Like all forms of cultural identity, religious identities can be used to exclude and marginalise people belonging to other religious identities; they can be used to incite hatred against specific sectors of society. The interpretation of religions as isolated systems brings about a condition of potential conflict between religious groups which would always be ready to explode.*

*In Sen's view, cultural identities always result from a plurality of cultural components. Cultural identities take elements from other cultural identities. Therefore, cultural identities are not isolated systems: they are the product of a historical development which involves the participation of different individuals, groups, and cultures. Moreover, cultural identities are not made once and for all: on the contrary, cultural identities are dynamic phenomena which continuously take in new elements from other cultures and give elements to other cultures.*

*For our investigation, we shall mainly refer to Amartya Sen's study *Identity and Violence. The Illusion of Destiny*.*

**Keywords:** Amartya Sen, cultural identity, violence, group, exclusion, multiculturalism.

## 1) Introduction

In our study, we shall analyse some aspects of Sen's criticism of specific interpretations of cultural identity. We shall refer to Amartya Sen's book *Identity and Violence. The Illusion of Destiny*. We would like to introduce our inquiry with a quotation from Sen's book:

“The insistence, if only implicitly, on a choiceless singularity of human identity not only diminishes us all, it also makes the world much more flammable. The alternative to the divisiveness of one preeminent categorization is not any unreal claim that we are all much the same. That we are not. Rather, the main hope of harmony in our troubled world lies in the

plurality of our identities, which cut across each other and work against sharp divisions around one single hardened line of vehement division that allegedly cannot be resisted. Our shared humanity gets savagely challenged when our differences are narrowed into one devised system of uniquely powerful categorization.

Perhaps the worst impairment comes from the neglect – and denial – of the role of reasoning and choice, which follows from the recognition of our plural identities. The illusion of unique identity is much more divisive than the universe of plural and diverse classifications that characterize the world in which we actually live. The descriptive weakness of choiceless singularity has the effect of momentously impoverishing the power and reach of our social and political reasoning. The illusion of destiny exacts a remarkably heavy price.”<sup>3</sup>

We shall see that, in Sen’s view, different interpretations of cultural identity can be given. Thus, we shall find interpretations of cultural identity which are mutually incompatible. The incompatible concepts of cultural identity are the following:

– The first conception of cultural identity considers every cultural identity as the result of many components which have experienced changes in the past, are experiencing new changes in the present, and will experience further changes in the future. All cultural identities as such are phenomena which develop. They are, as such, dynamic and not static systems. Cultural identities do not arise as a system which is complete once and for all. Cultural identity is, as such, a plurality of elements. Cultural identity, since it is something which lives, absorbs elements from other cultures, and gives elements to other cultures. A continuous interchange between cultural identities comes about. No cultural identity exists as an absolutely original system. Since the cultural identity is a plurality of components, and since every component can receive a different degree of importance from the individual thanks to the individual’s free choice to give different degrees of attention to the aspects composing his cultural identity, the cultural identity is relativised. Every cultural identity has a development; it is not something rigid or static. This interpretation of cultural identity is the flexible, dynamic, and inclusive view of cultural identity: it corresponds to Sen’s interpretation of cultural identity. Sen’s investigation is an attempt to protect the freedom of the individual: if the individual is considered as completely belonging to his cultural identity,

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<sup>3</sup> Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence. The Illusion of Destiny*, pp. 16–17.

his group, his nation, his culture, and his language, if the individual is considered as an entity completely determined by the previously mentioned factors, then the individual is no longer a being which can determine itself. He does not possess either mental freedom or mental free spaces. On the contrary, his mind is completely occupied by the cultural components which he possesses: the individual is possessed by his cultural components.

– The second conception of cultural identity interprets cultural identity as a monodimensional system. This is the rigid, static, and marginalising conception of cultural identity. The second concept of cultural identity corresponds to the aim of producing individuals, peoples, and groups as mutually isolated systems. This concept is connected to the political strategy of isolating individuals, peoples, and groups from each other: it has the potential to provoke hatred, violence, and conflicts. In this view, the cultural identity is absolutised since it is isolated from all other cultures: it is considered as something original which has never had, does not have, does not need to have, and – most of all – should not have any exchange with other cultures. Cultures emerge as complete systems: they ought to remain complete systems, and they ought to remain free from every interchange with other cultures, since every form of interchange is only a contamination of the cultures. Every form of contact of a culture with other cultures is interpreted as a contamination of this culture.

In his inquiry, Sen aims to illustrate that the possibility of a reciprocal dialogue between individuals, groups and people consists in finding the intersections of the different cultural identities. Intersections are common aspects between individuals and groups. Consequently, they are points of contact between different individuals and between different groups. If, on the other hand, a kind of society comes about that consists of parallel communities which do not want to have anything in common with each other, this society is condemned to find difficulties in the mutual communication between its citizens. This society is therefore condemned to be exposed to a climate of potential violence between the different groups.

## 2) Anthropology

One of the roots of the difference between the two interpretations of cultural identity consists in the interpretation which is given of the individual. The individual can be considered as being bound to the

inherited traditions, or he can be considered as having different cultural identities depending on the affiliations which he has in life:

“One of the central issues must be how human beings are seen. Should they be categorized in terms of inherited traditions, particularly the inherited religion, of the community in which they happen to be born, taking that unchosen identity to have automatic priority over other affiliations involving politics, profession, class, gender, language, literature, social involvements, and many other connections? Or should they be understood as persons with many affiliations and associations the priorities over which they must themselves choose (taking the responsibility that comes from reasoned choice)?”<sup>4</sup>

Sen’s inquiry proves to be a detailed study of the absolutisation of cultural identity and of the psychological mechanisms connected to some interpretations of cultural identity. Throughout his investigation, Sen shows that every cultural identity can be used to marginalise all those who do not belong to a specific cultural identity. This kind of cultural identity is built to divide individuals from each other, to divide groups from each other, and to divide peoples from each other. Through his analysis, Sen is fulfilling an enlightenment process: he is showing the potential destructiveness which is connected to certain interpretations of cultural identity.

Sen’s analysis is a study of the complexity of concepts, too. For instance, Sen shows that cultural identity is a complex concept, i.e., it consists of different components: every cultural identity is the result of processes of development. Individuals are complex entities, since they have different components in themselves, although it can happen that individuals are not aware of their complexity.

In Sen’s view, individuals can be easily manipulated. Individuals can be led to believe that they have only one closed and isolated culture, although they do not have, on closer inspection, only one closed and isolated culture. Cultural identity can be used to create a group which, as such, either does not exist at all or is not so homogeneous and so uniform as those who support this concept of cultural identity aim to make it appear. A group is created artificially through the invention of a cultural identity in which exclusively specific elements are isolated, in order that some individuals are included in the group, whereas other individuals are

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<sup>4</sup> Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence. The Illusion of Destiny*, p. 150.

excluded from the same group. The artificial group, which is created through this artificial cultural identity, is then incited against other groups. The process consists, therefore, in two fundamental steps:

- isolation of specific cultural elements;
- incitation of all those who possess specific cultural elements against all those who do not possess these cultural elements.

This kind of cultural identity is a cultural identity which is functional to the fomentation of enmity and hostility, of division and separation, of discord and dissension. This way of individuating groups is artificial since it isolates one element from the many elements which compose the cultural identity of an individual: it is built to incite hatred of the group created through this cultural identity against other groups<sup>5</sup>.

Religions, too, can be used as a weapon if the religious identity is absolutised. The concept of cultural identity is not necessarily founded on religious faith. Nonetheless, we can find in Sen examples of conflicts due to the absolutisation of religious identities: through this process of absolutisation, a religion is used against other religions; the members of religious groups are incited to be hostile towards and to hate the members of other religious groups. Thus, religious identities, too, can be absolutised and used to exclude from a specific religious group all those who do not belong to a specific confession of faith<sup>6</sup>. Like all forms of cultural identity,

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<sup>5</sup> Sen's interest in cultural identity primarily regards the world of adults; however, Sen's interest is also directed to the world of children. Sen criticises, for instance, the structure of confessional schools, since confessional schools, instead of promoting integration between children belonging to different backgrounds, lock the children themselves into groups between which mutual contact is absent. Individuals should be considered primarily as individuals (and not, e.g., as members of a group). The individual is not reducible to the groups of which he is a member. The individual's belonging to a group does not mean that the individual is the property of the group to which he belongs.

<sup>6</sup> Religions are transformed into the exclusive and exclusionary cultural identity of an individual, a group, or a people, as though individuals, groups and people were exclusively this or that religious content: consequently, individuals, groups and people are considered and persuaded to be extraneous to all those who do not belong to the same confession of faith. In this way, individuals, groups, and peoples are isolated from each other, as though they could not have any other cultural elements which unite them with each other. Since an individual is exclusively the contents of his religion, he is either culturally the same as those

religious identities can be used to exclude or to marginalise individuals and groups; they can be used to incite hatred against people. A way of interpreting religions as absolute systems which are isolated and must remain isolated from all other religions would bring about a reciprocally hostile disposition between religions which would always be ready to explode.

As mentioned, in Sen's view, there is a precise responsibility of the individual as regards the disposition which the individual has in relation to his cultural components. The question is whether the individual aims to privilege an element of his components or whether he is ready to acknowledge himself as a being composed of different elements. This difference means, for the individuals, different ways of living their own culture: the first individual absolutises a component of his cultural identity to the detriment of all others (he denies that his cultural identity has different components). The other individual relativises all components since he recognises that his cultural identity has many components and is the result of development. The individual's responsibility cannot be forgotten: the individual is responsible for the way in which he lives and chooses to live his cultural identity.

### **3) Contrapositions**

As regards the danger represented by the absolutisation of cultural identity, Sen expresses the following observations:

“With suitable instigation, a fostered sense of identity with one group of people can be made into a powerful weapon to brutalize another.

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who belong to his religion or culturally separated from all those who do not belong to his confession of faith. Therefore, he is either united to the other individual or he is irremediably divided by all other individuals, as though he could not have any further cultural element which unites him with the individual who does not follow his religion. The process always functions through the reduction of an individual to a cultural element: consequently, all the individuals who possess this element belong to the same group, whereas all the individuals who do not possess this element are separated from the mentioned group. Those who support the absolute conception of the cultural identity contend that all those who are separated from a group do not have, cannot have, and can never find authentic points of contact with the group from which they are separated. Groups are, in this interpretation, isolated systems.

Indeed, many of the conflicts and barbarities in the world are sustained through the illusion of a unique and choiceless identity. The art of constructing hatred takes the form of invoking the magical power of some allegedly predominant identity that drowns other affiliations, and in a conveniently bellicose form can also overpower any human sympathy or natural kindness that we may normally have. The result can be homespun elemental violence, or globally artful violence and terrorism.”<sup>7</sup>

In this passage, we can observe the roots of violence. Sen is aware of the dangers of the absolutisation of cultural identity. Hence, for the absolute concept of cultural identity, there is one and only one cultural identity for each person. In this interpretation, every person belongs to a culture: first comes the culture, then comes the person; the individual is subordinated to his culture. Moreover, every person belongs to a culture and only to a culture. Every person has exclusively one cultural identity. Cultural identities are isolated systems. The person does not choose her cultural identity; on the contrary, the person is possessed by her cultural identity. There is no freedom as regards the relations of the individual to his cultural identity: the individual is bound to his cultural identity. No cultural identity can be chosen. Cultural identity is formed, constituted, and given once and for all. It builds the mind of every individual that belongs to it: cultural identity is, in the absolute view of cultural identity, the very structure of the individual mind<sup>8</sup>: therefore, no individual can step out from it or distance himself from it.

In the absolute view of cultural identity, cultural identity is presented as something original: it is not the composition of different elements, and it is not the evolution of different elements; it is not the result of developments, changes, or absorption of elements. Every cultural identity forms an entity which is isolated from the other cultural identities: it exists along with the other cultural identities as something isolated from them. There are no exchanges between cultural identities: they constitute mutually isolated systems. Any exchange whatsoever would be, in the view of those who support the rigid conception of cultural identity, contamination and degeneration of the purity of the cultural identity.

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<sup>7</sup> Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence. The Illusion of Destiny*, p. xv.

<sup>8</sup> Cultural identity, is in this interpretation, the individual mind itself since cultural identity is the whole content of the mind. The mind does not possess anything else: this kind of cultural identity is static, original and has no development.

In the view of those who support this interpretation of cultural identity, the individual ought to discover or rediscover his cultural identity, he ought to go back to his roots, he ought to be faithful to his cultural identity and ought to refuse every form of contamination with other cultural identities. In this interpretation of cultural identity, the individual is possessed by his cultural identity, even though he does not know it and has no awareness of it. The individual cannot but recognise his cultural identity and his dependence on it. To discover one's cultural identity is to acknowledge one's being bound to one's cultural identity. Moreover, to give up or to refuse one's cultural identity would be regarded as a betrayal of one's cultural identity. If a cultural identity is contaminated with heterogeneous elements, it is destroyed. The purity of the cultural identity ought to be defended. An atmosphere of hostility against all other cultural forms is promoted: the purity of the cultural identity is presented as being under siege from all other cultural forms.

The characters connected to the absolute interpretation of the cultural identity are the following:

- Individuals are determined by their cultural identity.
- Cultural identities determine the historical development of individuals and groups<sup>9</sup>.
- Historical developments of countries are to be explained as the realisation of the culture to which the countries belong; cultures determine the historical evolutions of a country.
- Individuals cannot get out of their cultural identity; individuals cannot go beyond their own cultural identity; cultural identity is a second nature for the individual.
- Individuals are the property of traditions and groups.
- Individuals are, as such, dissolved into communities that control them.
- Every society is made up of parallel groups/communities. The communities are parallel to each other since they have little communication, or no communication at all, with each other.

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<sup>9</sup> Sen criticises the concept that cultures determine both economic advancement and economic backwardness in his study *How Does Culture Matter?* The study has been published in the volume *Culture and Public Action*, edited by Vijayendra Rao and Michael Walton, pp. 37–58 (see, in particular, in Sen's study, the paragraph *Cultural Determinism*, pp. 46–50).

In the view of those who support this interpretation of cultural identity, individuals are divided into groups which culturally have nothing to do or at least not very much to do with each other<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> The passages through which a cultural identity is transformed into a rigid cultural identity and is then used to produce hostility of a group towards other groups could be summarised in the following way:

- A cultural identity is absolutised.
- A rigid interpretation of the components of the cultural identity is pleaded for.
- All that does not belong to the cultural identity is excluded.
- All that does not belong to the cultural identity is refused.
- Every attempt to connect a cultural identity with other cultural identities is condemned.

The entire process could be synthesised through the three steps inclusion, seclusion, and exclusion.

The aspect of seclusion ought not to be forgotten. The seclusion of the members of a cultural identity is an essential process. Without seclusion, cultural identity cannot have an explosive potential. Sen expresses the following considerations as regards the process of absolutisation of one cultural identity to the disadvantage of the multiplicity of affiliations which every individual has:

“Underlying the coarse brutality, there is also a big conceptual confusion about people’s identities, which turns multidimensional human beings into onedimensional creatures. (...) The illusion of singular identity, which serves the violent purpose of those orchestrating such confrontations, is skillfully cultivated and fomented by the commanders of persecution and carnage. It is not remarkable that generating the illusion of unique identity, exploitable for the purpose of confrontation, would appeal to those who are in the business of fomenting violence, and there is no mystery in the fact that such reductionism is sought. But there is a big question about why the cultivation of singularity is so successful, given the extraordinary naïveté of that thesis in a world of obviously plural affiliations. To see a person exclusively in terms of only one of his or her many identities is, of course, a deeply crude intellectual move (as I have tried to argue in earlier chapters), and yet, judging from its effectiveness, the cultivated delusion of singularity is evidently easy enough to champion and promote. The advocacy of a unique identity for a violent purpose takes the form of separating out one identity group – directly linked to the violent purpose at hand – for special focus, and it proceeds from there to eclipse the relevance of other associations and affiliations through selective emphasis and incitement (...). The martial art of fostering violence draws on some basic instincts and uses them to crowd out the freedom to think and the possibility of composed reasoning. But it also draws, we have to recognise, on a kind of logic – a *fragmentary* logic. (...) What is done to turn that

Sen resolutely opposes this interpretation of cultural identity. Sen believes that the interpretation of human beings as bearing only one cultural identity within themselves is wrong. The correct interpretation of cultural identity is, in Sen's view, that everyone has in himself a plurality of cultural components, i.e., a plurality of cultural identities. The main aspects of Sen's position are the following:

- Cultures do not determine. There is no cultural determinism as regards the historical or economic development of individuals, groups, peoples, and countries. Cultures have several aspects: they cannot be considered as systems which influence an individual in only one direction. There can be no cultural determinism since every culture is made up of different components.

- Cultural identity does not consist in an absolutely original system; culture is not something which arises and grows up as an isolated system. Every culture takes elements from other cultures, it derives from pre-existing cultures, and it gives elements to other cultures. There is an interchange between cultures. Every cultural form changes. The idea of the purity of a culture proves to be, on closer inspection, a myth (besides being a danger).

- Cultures experience modifications, changes, additions, and losses. There is no culture which arises and exists as an isolated system.

- Cultures are not made and are not determined once and for all. Cultures have changes, evolutions, and developments.

- Individuals possess a composition of different cultures: they have mutually different cultural identities.

- All attempts to convince the individual that he has only a cultural identity, that this cultural identity ought always to be defended against contaminations from outside, that all other components are irrelevant, that he ought to discover or re-discover his cultural roots, and that he ought to

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sense of self-understanding into a murderous instrument is (1) to ignore the relevance of all other affiliations and associations, and (2) to redefine the demands of the "sole" identity in a particularly belligerent form. This is where the nastiness as well as the conceptual confusions are made to creep in." (Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence. The Illusion of Destiny*, pp. 174–176)

As we can see, the process consists in two steps, i.e., in ignoring the affiliations and associations of the individuals, on the one hand, and in privileging one cultural identity of the individuals, on the other hand. This cultural identity is defined in a hostile way towards all other cultural identities.

go back to his true origins, turn out to be, on closer inspections, attempts to manipulate the individual, to imprison the individual in a group, and to let the individual disappear as regards his individuality. They correspond to the strategy of secluding the individual into a specific group, of isolating this individual from other groups, and of excluding from this specific group all the individuals who do not have the specific cultural identity corresponding to the group.

- The individuals ought not to be dissolved into groups. The centre of society is the individual. Groups come thereafter.

- The absolutisation of the cultural identity aims to dissolve the individual into the group, into the nation, into the community, and into the state by contending that the individual has no relevance in comparison with the cultural identity.

- The individual can choose between the different components of his cultural identity. He has the responsibility too for the choice which he makes as regards his cultural components, i.e., for the choice which he makes as regards the cultural component to which he wants to give greater importance.

- The individual ought not to become or be the prisoner of an element of a cultural identity.

- The concept of rigid cultural identity is functional to the manipulation of the individual.

- No individual may be reduced to a single scheme, i.e., to a monodimensional cultural identity; no individual is absorbed by a single tradition (unless the individual is manipulated).

In Sen's view, every cultural identity proves, on closer inspection, to consist of many components. Every cultural identity turns out to be a plurality of cultural identities since it consists of many elements. Every cultural identity is composed of multiple parts and has evolved from many components: it continually incorporates and absorbs new elements. It is not something original since it is always the composition of pre-existing elements. The cultural identity of the individual is not made once and for all. It is not something uncompounded and is not something unchanging. Cultural identities are systems which continuously change. Cultural identities are dynamic systems. This aspect holds for the individual too: the specific cultural identity consists in a plurality of cultural components. Moreover, the cultural identity of the individual changes depending on the experiences and the life of the individual. The cultural identity of an

individual is not static. Both generally and individually, cultural identities change. Hence, all positions pleading for the concept of the original character of culture, which ought not to be contaminated with heterogeneous elements, do not have any authentic foundation or legitimization: their model of cultural identity does not correspond to the authentic essence of cultural identities. These positions correspond to the intention of manipulating individuals. At the basis of the insistence on the purity of a culture, on the necessity of coming back to the authentic roots of a culture, and on avoiding every kind of contamination from other cultures, there is the aim of manipulating the individual and of trapping him into specific mental schemes which are functional to precise political strategies. The individual disappears behind a too narrowly defined concept of cultural identity (the aim of those who support this interpretation of cultural identity is precisely to annihilate the individual in his autonomy to the advantage of the cultural identity).

Because of this conception of cultural identity, the individual risks subordinating himself or having to subordinate himself to a larger organisation (e.g., group, nation, state, community) since, in this interpretation of cultural identity, the individual is his cultural identity, which is rigidly monovalent. In the absolutising interpretation of the cultural identity, the cultural identity absorbs the individual, who is nothing without it. The individual ought to recognise his inferiority to the culture and to the group to which he belongs. The individual ought to submit to the culture and to the group to which he belongs; he should obey the group. In this interpretation, cultural identity is the authentic centre of society. Individuals live for their cultural identity and for the group to which they belong; they are inferior to their culture, they ought to recognise their subalternity to their cultural identity, and they should sacrifice their individuality and their autonomy to their cultural identity. They ought not to contaminate themselves with heterogeneous elements. An attitude of hostility against all those who do not belong to a specific culture and against all other cultures is pleaded for. This cultural identity, with which Sen disagrees, has a double goal since it is a model of cultural identity built, at the same time,

- for the exclusion of individuals from a group to which this specific cultural identity is referred, and
- for the elimination of dissension within the same group.

Exclusion and seclusion, marginalisation and incarceration are the aims and the consequences of this interpretation of cultural identity.

On closer inspection, an absolutised view of cultural identity proves to be an artificially built instrument for the annihilation of the individual in his specificity as being individual: the rigid cultural identity closes and secludes the individual into a culture. The individual disappears in this artificial model of culture. Sen defines this condition as the incarceration of the individual in the cultural identity. The rigid cultural identity is functional to the inclusion and seclusion of individuals in isolated groups: individuals are absorbed and annulled in the group. The rigid interpretation of cultural identity serves to the exclusion of all individuals who have a different culture: it answers to the aims of both including/imprisoning some people and marginalising other people. It is functional to a programme of homogenisation of certain groups and to the spread of exclusion, hostility, and intolerance<sup>11</sup>.

#### 4) Complexity

In Sen's view, the nature of the individual does not correspond to the interpretation which those who support the rigid cultural identity give:

"Our shared humanity gets savagely challenged when the manifold divisions in the world are unified into one allegedly dominant system of classification – in terms of religion, or community, or culture, or nation, or civilization (treating each as uniquely powerful in the context of that particular approach to war and peace). The uniquely partitioned world is much more divisive than the universe of plural and diverse categories that shape the world in which we live. It goes not only against the old-fashioned belief that "we human beings are all much the same" (which tends to be ridiculed these days – not entirely without reason – as much too softheaded), but also against the less discussed but much more plausible understanding that we are *diversely different*. The hope of harmony in the contemporary world lies to a great extent in a clearer understanding of the pluralities of human identity, and in the appreciation

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<sup>11</sup> An individual who has a cultural identity without being able to distance himself from that cultural identity would be an individual held hostage by his cultural identity (see *Identity and Violence. The Illusion of Destiny*, especially pp. 174–176 and 178–179).

that they cut across each other and work against a sharp separation along one single hardened line of impenetrable division.”<sup>12</sup>

The shared humanity is annulled through the manipulation strategy of those who support the absolutisation of cultural identity. In Sen’s view, every individual is always the result of different components. Moreover, every individual is evolving during his own life. Every individual has had a development, every individual has a development, and every individual will have a development, even though he is not aware of this. All individuals are a plurality of components, even though they perceive themselves and want to be perceived as monodimensional systems. Individuals are neither static nor monovalent systems. The monodimensionality does not exist in individuals. The assertion that only one cultural identity exists for an individual is functional to the aim of manipulating the individual. Sen criticises different views, such as, for instance:

- Every individual has one and exclusively one cultural identity, i.e., one and exclusively one culture.
- Every individual must be classified on the basis of one and only one cultural affiliation.
- Every individual recognises (therefore, he does not choose, create, or modify) his cultural identity and cannot distance himself from that cultural identity (in this interpretation of cultural identity, cultural identities constitute a second nature for the individual; the individual is his cultural identity and nothing but his cultural identity; the individual belongs to his cultural identity, and is subordinated to his cultural identity).

Sen firmly believes that all individuals are a multiplicity in themselves. The individual as such is a plurality of cultural components. Every individual is the result of the additions of different traditions<sup>13</sup>: he is the

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<sup>12</sup> Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence. The Illusion of Destiny*, pp. xiii–xiv.

<sup>13</sup> Every historical phenomenon always arises from a plurality of components: there is no absolute originality of a particular culture. Every culture always consists of different components. Every culture is, on closer inspection, many cultures since it arises from different previous cultural components and evolves through the changes of its different cultural components. Every form of culture always comes from different components; all individuals live in a milieu which, despite the appearance of uniformity and singularity, always contains within itself a multiplicity and a plurality of cultural components.

result of a plurality of cultural layers. Therefore, every individual has a plurality of cultural identities within himself, even though he is not aware of this condition.

The individual can choose in every phase of his life which cultural identity is the most important for him in that specific phase of his life. Cultural identity is not a destiny but arises from an act of will and from a specific choice. The culture under which an individual could/should be classified is not destiny, i.e., a specific culture does not represent, for the individual, a second nature to which the individual is inseparably bound. The individual can, at least in a certain measure, distance himself from his cultural identity.

The cultural identity which all individuals bring with themselves does not constitute a discovery of a nature that dominates and determines the individual. Every cultural form that an individual has within himself influences the individual without determining the individual. There is a multiplicity of cultural components which the individual possesses: the individual can choose between the different components which he has in himself and can decide to which cultural component he gives a greater weight or the greatest weight<sup>14</sup>. Moreover, the choice is not definitive: the individual can, in another period of life, decide to confer greater importance to another cultural component. The multiplicity of the cultural components which the individual can possess is limited, but the relevance of the different components is flexible: therefore, the cultural identity of an

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<sup>14</sup> It depends on the individual to decide to which component the individual wants to give greater importance. The decision depends on the individual; the determination of which component is more important arises from the free choice of the individual. Sen expresses the following reflections:

“Belonging to each one of the membership groups can be quite important, depending on the particular context. When they compete for attention and priority over each other (they need not always, since there may be no conflict between the demands of different loyalties), the person has to decide on the relative importance to attach to the respective identities, which will, again, depend on the exact context. There are two distinct issues here. First, the recognition that identities are robustly plural, and that the importance of one identity need not obliterate the importance of others. Second, a person has to make choices – explicitly or by implication – about what relative importance to attach, in a particular context, to the divergent loyalties and priorities that may compete for precedence.” (Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence. The Illusion of Destiny*, p. 19)

individual can change as regards the relevance of the different components of the cultural identity itself.

Sen's aim consists in showing that the process of absolutising a cultural identity to the detriment of all other forms of culture that every individual possesses has a potential for violence; the instrumentalisation of the cultural identity serves to dominate people and to lead them to determined dispositions towards other groups. The cultural identity separates the individuals of the different groups from each other and, at the same time, dominates the individuals within a group.

Individuals are not different from each other in an identical way; individuals are different from each other in many ways, in the sense that they can at the same time be assigned to different groups because of the plurality of their characteristics: they are diversely different in the sense that the differences between them are innumerable. The differences between individuals are not uniform since the individuals belong to different groups. Therefore, individuals are different from each other in many ways. Correspondingly, there is no uniform group which has the same difference from all the other entities: every individual is different from every other individual. Cultural identity means cultural identities since a specific cultural identity is always the result of many cultural components: hence, an individual can always be assigned to a plurality of groups at the same time. One and the same individual can be identical to some individuals due to some components of his cultural identity, and he can be at the same time different from the same individuals due to other components of his cultural identity. Therefore, groups are not fixed systems.

The dangers of absolute cultural identity can be remedied by the power of multiple cultural identities: if an individual understands that he has a plurality of cultural identities, this understanding can prevent every external attempt to absolutise cultural identity. Therewith, the dangers connected to absolute cultural identity can be prevented.

## 5) Pluralities

Sen argues that classifying people according to a few rigid criteria cannot do justice to the diversity of people. The individuals are much more different from each other than every classification can show:

“The politics of global confrontation is frequently seen as a corollary of religious or cultural divisions in the world. Indeed, the world is increasingly seen, if only implicitly, as a federation of religions or of civilizations, thereby ignoring all the other ways in which people see themselves. Underlying this line of thinking is the odd presumption that the people of the world can be uniquely categorized according to some *singular and overarching* system of partitioning. Civilizational or religious partitioning of the world population yields a “solitarist” approach to human identity, which sees human beings as members of exactly one group (in this case defined by civilization or religion, in contrast with earlier reliance on nationalities and classes).”<sup>15</sup>

Sen denies that the world (or a state) can be viewed as a composite of religions, civilisations, or communities<sup>16</sup>. The components of society are the individuals, who cannot be reduced to their belonging to this or that group. The individual constitutes an irreducible entity: therefore, individuals cannot be reduced to something else which is superior to them. The basis of society is and remains the individual. The individual is essentially irreducible to other entities or to other systems.

Those who divide and classify individuals on the basis of rigid criteria assume that an individual can be referred to a single culture and to a single group. Cultural identity is interpreted, in this view, as something absolute. In Sen’s view, classifying an individual under only one category is misleading since every individual possesses a plurality of components. Cultural identity is not something monolithic. The cultural identity of an individual always consists in a plurality of elements:

“A solitarist approach can be a good way of misunderstanding nearly everyone in the world. In our normal lives, we see ourselves as members of a variety of groups – we belong to all of them.”<sup>17</sup>

The notion that there is a single cultural identity for the individual does not give a true representation of the individual: the nature of individuals does not correspond to the image which those who support the concept of the monodimensional cultural identity give of the individuals. The authentic nature of the individual does not correspond to the

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<sup>15</sup> Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence. The Illusion of Destiny*, p. xii.

<sup>16</sup> See Sen’s criticism of Huntington’s theses expressed in the book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order in Identity and Violence. The Illusion of Destiny*, pp. 40–43, 46–50, 106–108.

<sup>17</sup> Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence. The Illusion of Destiny*, p. xii.

interpretation which the solitarist interpretation gives of him. Every individual is always a plurality of cultural elements: all individuals possess a plurality of cultural elements. The relevance of the elements of cultural identities varies depending on the way of life and on the interests of the individuals. The value of an element of a specific cultural identity depends on the context in which the individual lives or on the interest which the individual pursues in his life: consequently, it should be borne in mind that the weight of every element belonging to a specific cultural identity changes or can change.

- On the one hand, the cultural identity consists of a multiplicity of cultural elements. The elements of the cultural identities change.

- On the other hand, every element of the cultural identity does not occupy a definitively determined position in relation to all the other elements. The relevance of an element of a cultural identity can vary depending on the life circumstances and on the individual's interests.

Those who support the flexible conception of cultural identity will interpret cultural identities as dynamic systems. They know that every cultural identity is the result of a process of unification between different components; they are aware that every cultural identity is the result of historical developments. They know that every cultural identity is not given once and for all, but it has changed, it changes, and it will change. Every cultural identity is an entity which has an evolution: therefore, it is not static, and it is not given once and for all. Cultural identities are not complete systems: they come about as the result of a process, and they have further developments. They are always in a process. Cultural identities are always a work in progress.

Cultural identities are not absolute systems because, among other things, they are always the result of pre-existing cultural forms: they arise from preceding cultures and always have close connections with other cultural forms. The absolutely original content does not exist. Cultural identity is a dynamic system: it is evolving, changing, and developing<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Sen points out in his investigation that within this interpretation, cultural identity is seen as a system to be discovered and correspondingly not to be chosen; the aim of presenting cultural identity as a phenomenon to be discovered is to contend that the cultural identity is a system which is already given independently of the actions, the choices, the thought of the individual. In this interpretation, individuals are subjected to their cultural identities. The individual discovers an

The concept on the basis of which a single classification scheme for each individual exists is, in Sen's opinion, inherently wrong. It does not matter whether the classification scheme is based on religion, community, culture, nation, or civilisation: human beings cannot be classified according to a single criterion since human beings have a plurality of cultural components.

## 6) Sen's criticism of communitarian and multiculturalist positions

Sen criticises the communitarian positions too as the following passage can attest:

"Many communitarian thinkers tend to argue that a dominant communal identity is only a matter of self-realization, not of choice. It is, however, hard to believe that a person really has no choice in deciding what relative importance to attach to the various groups to which he or she belongs, and that she must just "discover" her identities, as if it were a purely natural phenomenon (like determining whether it is day or night). In fact, we are all constantly making choices, if only implicitly, about the priorities to be attached to our different affiliations and associations. The freedom to determine our loyalties and priorities between the different groups to all of which we may belong is a peculiarly important liberty which we have reason to recognize, value, and defend."<sup>19</sup>

Sen's opposition to communitarian thinking comes out clearly in this context. According to Sen, communitarians hold the following views:

- There is a dominant cultural identity; there is one and exclusively one cultural identity, and not a plurality of identities.
- The individual recognises that a dominant cultural identity exists and that he belongs to that cultural identity. The individual plays only a secondary role if he is compared with the cultural identity and with the group. Groups and cultural identities, not the individuals, are the centre of society.

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entity which has been made without his contribution. Cultural identity is not modifiable. The individual cannot go out of that cultural identity: an individual cannot step out from his nature. Cultural identity is considered, within this perspective, as a natural phenomenon, not as a historical phenomenon which, since it is historical, has a development.

<sup>19</sup> Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence. The Illusion of Destiny*, p. 5.

- The impression which the reader receives from the description of the communitarian positions is that communitarians see the individual as something to be dissolved into an entity which transcends him<sup>20</sup>.
- Communitarians interpret the kind of relationship of the individual with his cultural identity as a matter of discovery and of recognition of a pre-existing cultural identity. There is no free choice. In this interpretation of cultural identity, the individual can only accept his own cultural identity. The individual cannot distance himself from his cultural identity: the cultural identity constitutes his very nature.

Sen believes that every form of cultural identity is never something whose content has been determined once and for all. The individual is not possessed by any cultural identity, or at least the individual is in the condition of not being possessed by any cultural identity if he chooses not to become the property of any cultural identity. The responsibility of the individual may never be excluded as regards the kind of relation which the individual has with his cultural identity: it is a matter of the individual's choice and responsibility whether the individual absolutises his cultural identity or whether he relativises it.

The communitarians see the individual as submitted to his cultural identity, i.e., as a property of the cultural identity. The individual is the property of his cultural identity. Cultural identity is the constitutive cultural nature of the individual: consequently, the individual cannot be detached from his culture. The individual is nothing else than his culture, i.e., the individual is nothing without and besides his culture (the individual does not exist without his culture at the psychological, mental, and behavioural levels). Against this conception, Sen interprets the individual as a free being which can distance itself from its cultural identity.

Sen gives value to the capacity for self-determination which communitarians do not recognise. Communitarians do not think that the individual can determine himself against his cultural identity. The choice of the individual is the decisive aspect for Sen: the individual can always be

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<sup>20</sup> Sen defends the primacy of the individual beyond any form of affiliation. The individual comes first; cultural identities follow. No entity transcends the individual. The individual cannot be reduced to something else; the individual does not dissolve in a superior organism since there is no superior organism.

free from his cultural identity if the individual is ready to use his capacity for self-determination.

In Sen's view, the multiculturalism of the parallel communities is, on closer inspection, a form of plural monoculturalism in which the individuals are prisoners of the traditions of their community. The presence of different cultures in a country is necessary, but not sufficient, to have a multicultural society. For Sen, multiculturalism as such presupposes and requires exchanges between cultures. In an authentic multicultural society, cultures are not islands: there are relationships, exchanges, and communications between groups.

## 7) Conclusions

Sen's intent consists in showing that cultural identity can have different senses. His aim consists in showing that cultural identity is not something original, given once and for all. Every cultural identity is the result of a process; every cultural identity will change through new processes. Cultural identity is a composition of elements. Individuals do not belong to something absolute since this absolute does not exist. Individuals are all differently different: there is no group in which every individual of a specific group is at the same time identical to each other member of the group in all aspects, on the one hand, and different in all aspects from the individuals not belonging to this group, on the other hand. Sen's text proves to be a demystification of the manipulations of individuals through the concept of culture and of cultural identity as something which absorbs some individuals and excludes other individuals. The monodimensional interpretation of cultural identity is an operation for the enslavement of the individual in a cultural component.

The different interpretations of cultural identities imply different models for society: the interpretation of the rigid cultural identity and the interpretation of flexible cultural identity bring about different societies since these models of interpretation of the cultural identity support the existence of different kinds of groups and produce different kinds of groups. Societies will be different depending on the interpretations of cultural identity. The society of the flexible cultural identity will be inclusive; the society of the rigid cultural identity, on the contrary, will be a marginalising society.

Sen argues for the presence of different cultural identities within an individual: his starting point is never the group. The starting point is the individual who is, as such, an irreducible entity. Sen shows that cultural identities are often determined on the basis of an arbitrary way of proceeding: a specific component of an individual is privileged to the disadvantage of other components.

A society characterised by flexible cultural identity has different groups present in itself and is open to the presence of different groups. Individuals can be members of groups, but they are not property of the groups. They acknowledge that any culture whatsoever is the result of different components; they acknowledge that cultures have a steady development. They can and are ready to recognise that their cultural identity is something which has had changes, is changing – even though the individual is not aware of the changes – and will change. There are no definitive results as regards cultural identities.

Every individual consists of a plurality of cultural identities: therefore, the cultural identity of every human being is to be understood as a system of cultural identities. To sum up the results of our investigation:

- There is not only one cultural identity for an individual.
- Each cultural identity arises from a plurality of cultural identities.
- Each individual consists of a plurality of cultural components: individuals bring within themselves a plurality of cultural identities and of cultures; they cannot be reduced to one and only one cultural identity.
- The absolutisation of cultural identity serves the purpose of internally uniting the group characterised by this same cultural identity, of separating the group from other groups on the basis of this cultural identity, and of excluding from the group all those who do not possess this cultural identity. Rigid cultural identity divides. This kind of cultural identity is built in order that it can divide. Those who interpret cultural identity in such a way interpret cultural identity in this way since they want to divide the groups from each other. They want to reach the internal uniformity of the group and the exclusion of all those who do not belong to the group.
- The absolutisation of a cultural identity constitutes a straitjacket for every individual.
- The assertion that every individual has one and only one cultural identity serves to the formation of closed groups and to the exclusion of

people from the closed groups. It has an immediate potential for violence<sup>21</sup>.

- The absolutisation of cultural identity should be countered by means of the notion that everyone has many components: the cultural identity of every individual is both something made up of many components and something that is not still but constantly evolving.
- The responsibility for one's cultural identity, and thus also for the possible absolutisation of a single aspect, is always borne by the individual. Every individual can decide to which component he gives greater importance. The individual has the free choice and the responsibility for his choice.
- Communities and groups deserve due consideration; nevertheless, the state is not a federation of communities or of groups: the state consists of individuals. Individuals may not be dissolved in or reduced to groups or to communities.

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<sup>21</sup> The reduction of individuals to cultural cages can lead to an attitude of contempt both towards individuals and towards peoples. Sen analyses the negative influence caused by the prejudices against Irish and Indians at the time of the Great Famine in Ireland and at the time of the Bengal Famine: the cultural cages which were a direct consequence of the stereotypical classifications of the Irish and of the Indians brought about an attitude of indifference and of contempt from the British government towards Ireland's and India's population. See in Sen's works *Poverty and Famines*; pp. 39–153, *Identity and Violence. The Illusion of Destiny*, pp. 104–106, *Development as Freedom*, pp. 170–175.