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Michael Bowden
Roger Williams University

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No 'Clash of Civilizations': Harvard Economist and Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen Says Huntington Got It Wrong

Amartya Sen. *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*. W.W. Norton, 2006.

Amartya Sen. *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity*. Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 2005.

Amartya Sen—winner of the 2004 Nobel Prize in Economics, professor of economics at Harvard, former Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, and former professor of economics at Oxford University, the London School of Economics and Delhi University—has a bone to pick with his formidable Harvard colleague, Samuel P. Huntington, the political scientist behind the celebrated paradigm of “clashing civilizations.”

In a 2005 essay collection *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity*, Sen, a citizen of India, called it an error to view “the contemporary world as a ‘clash of civilizations’—with ‘the Muslim civilization’, ‘the Hindu civilization’ and ‘the Western civilization’ each forcefully confronting the others.” Instead, he asserted, “we have to recognize that our global civilization is a world heritage—not just a collection of disparate local cultures.”

Sen further developed these arguments in a 2006 work, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*, prompting the *Washington Post* to observe that “Sen has assigned himself the role of the anti-Huntington.” He rejects the clash thesis of cultural conflict as “yielding a one-dimensional approach to human identity—and leading to the ‘civilizational and religious partitioning of the world,’ which can only occasion greater global disorder.”

Indeed, the very idea of a clash of civilizations “partitions” the world into discrete, static, monolithic “cultures,” while ignoring the constant flow of intellectual, political, scientific, cultural and artistic exchange, not to mention the complexity of the myriad human individuals who make up every civilization:

The same person can be, without any contradiction, an American citizen, of Caribbean origin, with African ancestry, a Christian, a liberal, a woman, a vegetarian, a long-distance runner, a historian, a schoolteacher, a novelist, a feminist, a heterosexual, a believer in gay and lesbian rights, a theater lover, an environmental activist, a tennis fan, a jazz musician, and someone who is deeply committed to the view that there are intelligent beings in outer space with whom it is extremely urgent to talk, preferably in English.

Yet none of these categories, in and of themselves, suffice to define fully who this person is, or what combination of interests, biases and beliefs might influence her response to any given set of circumstances. “Each of these collectivities, to all of which this person simultaneously belongs, gives her a particular identity,” Sen concludes.

We are no different. None of us are just Christians or just Muslims or just Jews, Hindus or Buddhists. We are human beings—messy, mixed-up conglomerations of innumerable categories, every one of which offers an opportunity for commonality with others, for dialog instead of conflict. Our civilizational identity, Sen insists, is not our destiny.

The Role of Reason

One of Sen's essays in *The Argumentative Indian* called "The Reach of Reason" further delves into the complexities of human identity and the influences that determine which of our many individual "cultures" might dictate our behavior when traumatic events, such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks, test the limits of our cultural tolerance:

One of the main points in favour of reason is that it helps us to transcend ideology and blind belief.... [This] is a strong source of hope and confidence in a world darkened by horrible deeds. It is easy to understand why this is so. Even when we find something immediately upsetting, or annoying, we are free to question that response and ask whether it is an appropriate reaction and whether we should really be guided by it. We can reason about the right way of perceiving and treating other people, other cultures, other claims, and examine different grounds for respect and tolerance. We can also reason about our own mistakes and try to learn not to repeat them.

Sen questions the extent to which such reason "is really compromised either by the undoubtedly powerful effects of human psychology, or by the pervasive influence of cultural diversity." Upon our response to this query, he adds, depend nothing less than "our hopes for the future and the ways and means of living in a decent world."

From this standpoint, Sen finds Huntington's "clash of civilizations" theory both unhelpful and misleading. In other words, he writes that the notion that tolerance, liberty and rationality are "quintessentially Western values" is not only "far from clear," it also obscures opportunities for dialog rather than violent confrontation:

Democracy is intimately connected with public discussion and interactive reasoning. Traditions of public discussion exist across the world, not just in the West. And to the extent that such a tradition can be drawn on, democracy becomes easier to institute and also to preserve.

Sen also takes aim at Huntington's assertions that the "preservation of the United States and the West requires the renewal of Western identity" and that "multiculturalism at home threatens the United States and the West." Such notions, he notes, are common among right-leaning political theorists worldwide:

The issue of cultural disharmony is very much alive in many cultural and political investigations: we hear of the 'clash of civilizations', the need to 'fight' Western cultural imperialism, the irresistible victory of 'Asian values', the challenge to Western civilization posed by the militancy of other cultures, and so on. The global confrontations have their reflections within the national frontiers as well, since most societies now have diverse cultures, which can appear to some to be very threatening.

Using the example of India in a recent interview, Sen said although the country “may be described as ‘a Hindu civilization’ in Huntington’s classification, [it] yet has had sizeable Christian and Jewish communities for nearly two thousand years, [was] mainly Buddhist for nearly a thousand years in its history, [and still] has Sikhs and Parsees and Jains, and more Muslims (145 million people) than nearly every country in Huntington’s list of countries in ‘the Muslim world.’”

Sen concludes that “we do have a choice about our beliefs, associations and attitudes” and that “‘cultural boundaries’ are not as limiting as sometimes alleged”:

Through selective emphases that point up differences with the West, other civilizations can be redefined in alien terms, which can be exotic and charming, or else bizarre and terrifying, or simply strange and engaging. When identity is thus ‘defined by contrast’, divergence with the West becomes central.... But once we recognize that many ideas that are taken to be quintessentially Western have also flourished in other civilizations, we also see that these ideas are not as culture-specific as is sometimes claimed. We need not begin with pessimism, at least on this ground, about the prospects of reasoned humanism in the world.

Michael Bowden, University Publications Editor
Department of Marketing & Communications