

The violence of the unique identity

A critical review of A. Sen's 'Identity and violence' (2006)

by Guido Traversa*

Amarthya Sen is right when he affirms in his book, *Identity and violence: the illusion of destiny* (W.W Norton & Co. NT-London, 2006), that:

«the conception of identity influences, in many different ways, our thoughts and actions (...). 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 (...). A solitarist approach can be a good way of misunderstanding nearly everyone in the world. (...) The imposition of an allegedly unique identity is often a crucial component of the “material art” of fomenting sectarian confrontation. (...) The uniquely partitioned world is much more divisive than the universe of plural and diverse categories that shape the world in which we live. (...) The illusion of destiny, particularly about some singular identity (...) nurtures violence (...). We have to see clearly that we have many distinct affiliations» (Prologue, pp. XII-XIV, *passim*).

These statements, which represent the central and constantly repeated idea of the whole book, have their centre of gravity both in the refusal of unique identities (mainly established with reference to classifications of religious and/or cultural kinds) that lead to conflicts, and in the need to promote pluralistic identities («we are differently different») that constitute every single person. Sen brings numerous and sundry examples of both the negative consequences of the former and the positive consequences made possible by the latter. I present here the one I consider particularly significant: «it would be a long-run victory of Nazism if the barbarities of the 1930s eliminated forever a Jewish person's freedom and ability to invoke any identity other than his or her Jewishness» (p. 8). All of Sen's reflection rotates around the undoubted evidence, unfortunately confirmed by his own experience, of Indian conflicts between Hindu and Muslims, that «many of the conflicts and barbarities in the world are sustained through the illusion of a unique and choiceless identity» (Preface, p. XV).

Moreover, I agree with Sen's critical view of “communitarism”, according to which the discovery of one's belonging identity is a natural fact, like the identity itself: in his words, «identity can be a source of richness and warmth» (p. 4). Sen believes that our pluralistic identity should be located at the very centre:

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«in our normal lives, we see ourselves as members of a variety of groups – we belong to all of them. 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. Each of these collectiveness, to all of which this person simultaneously belongs, gives her a particular identity. None of them can be taken to be the person’s only identity or singular membership category» (p. 5).

Although sympathetic with Sen’s thesis and with all its exterior articulations, this collection of writings doesn’t go far enough, as it keeps on repeating the thesis and bringing examples both of conflicts generated by unique identities, and of the many differences that constitute every human being. In other words, Sen’s picture of a reality filtered through two forms of identity, unique and pluralistic, although lucid and suitable to the realities he portrays, does not give an explanation – if not post festum – of what identity per se is; of why a monolithic identity might cause conflicts both within itself and with regard to other unique identities; of why (and not just how) personal identity is constituted by many differences (or identities); of why sometimes the very many differences within the same identity cannot connect to each other without conflicting; of why these many differences are also differences in value, which can for this very reason be in mutual conflict.

To sum up, I think that Sen’s analysis and description of social and political reality require a Theory of identity, of distinction, of the relationship between identity and distinction, of the “opposition” and of the genesis and form of the “conflict”. Without such a philosophical and epistemological Theory, this book’s thesis may only be deemed true, and is unable to “become true”: the difference is not merely semantic; what I mean is that, without an adequate Theory, the thesis remains descriptive as opposed to explicative, and therefore it is not able – not even de jure – to facilitate a better understanding historical reality in the aim of acting within that reality in a better way.

I recently elaborated, in the context of a peculiar platonic-aristotelian-thomistic-kantian tradition, a theory of identity (and of its non-unique de jure character, but one containing distinctions) and of the notion of conflict in a book entitled *Metaphysics of accidents. From logic to spirituality: the texture of things* (*Metafisica degli accidenti. Dalla logica alla spiritualità: il tessuto delle cose*, Manifestolibri, Rome, 2004, http://www.manifestolibri.it/vedi_indice.php?id=310).

There I endeavoured to demonstrate that every single thing’s identity, of every single action, of every single event, is constantly correlated to distinction; and that is not only because it is related with other determined identities, but also because is it in itself distinct. That may be deemed true even if only one thing, one action, one event existed, that is, even if there were no outside relationships. Every thing’s identity maintains distinction in itself, because it has accidents which are really (and not just gnoseologically) heterogeneous. Far from being mechanic, identity development occurs through propensities whose actualisation implies contingency.

Experience's concrete elements, which are often in reciprocal opposition without being inhomogeneous, will, as a matter of speculation, prove in fact to be commensurable. Reasoning this way, understanding will hopefully become a *secundum necessitatis* responsible act. By adopting this form of understanding and of acting, we are able to explain the genesis of conflicts not only as a relationship external to identity, but also as something internal to it, thus solving and not just describing them.

Identity itself "is". It exists and shows itself as it is in knowledge, it shows its ethical nature in action. And for that reason it is important to define the characteristics of a metaphysics of accidents: not just of an essence, or of a unique identity but, as Sen says, a pluralistic one.

My book explores the five fundamental dimensions of a metaphysics of accidents as well as of the *per se* distinct identity: 1) logics, 2) ontology, 3) epistemology, 4) ethics and politics, and 5) spirituality.

I have summarised here the general framework of a metaphysics of accidents, as a Theory of identity and of real conflicts, so as to reaffirm my complete support, from a philosophical and political viewpoint, of Amartya Sen's thesis. It is precisely for that reason that I deem it absolutely necessary to provide a logical, ontological and ethical apparatus that is able to explain the social genesis of monolithic identities and of conflicts deriving from them, with a view to constructing a "science", and consequently a political action, that might pass beyond the concept of a single, unique identity.

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