Identity, Violence and the Power of Illusion

Jonathan Glover (Contributor Webpage)

DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199239979.003.0024

Abstract and Keywords

This chapter is an attempt to develop Sen's discussion of how illusions about identity contribute to violent conflict. The importance of nationality and religion in people's sense of their identity is linked to deep psychological needs. The role of identity in violence is linked to group narratives, especially about humiliation and defeat. In terrorist attacks such as 9/11 and in the response to them, the cycle of violence is maintained by the backlash against perceived humiliation, together with illusions about collective responsibility. A case is made for an Enlightenment idea of international order as the way to escape from these cycles of violence.

Keywords: identity, violence, illusions, humiliation, backlash, Enlightenment

IT is a commonplace that Amartya Sen has played a huge role in broadening the conceptual base of economic theory. Central has been his insistence that explaining what people do in terms of preferences is much too simple. One simplification is the failure to distinguish between different motives, some of which are not directed towards personal gain. People can act
out of sympathy for others or out of commitments—perhaps moral, political or religious—that may conflict with narrow self-interest. He persuasively argues that a single ranking should be replaced by a “ranking of rankings”.

Sen’s discussion of commitments makes it clear that their core does not have to be either personal or universal: “Groups intermediate between oneself and all, such as class and community, provide the focus of many actions involving commitment” (Sen 1977: 109). He also signals awareness that these group commitments can be bound up with issues of identity: “‘We’ demand things; ‘our’ actions reflect ‘our’ concerns; ‘we’ protest at injustice done to ‘us’. This is, of course, the language of social intercourse and of politics; but it is difficult to believe that it represents nothing other than a verbal form, and in particular no sense of identity” (Sen 2002: 215).

Characteristically, Sen’s attunement to the role of identity in these group commitments is combined with arguments showing that much of the resulting identity politics rests on simplification and illusion. In particular he argues against two “unfounded assumptions”. The first is the illusion of the simplicity of identity: the belief that “we must have a single—or at least a principal and dominant—identity”. The second is the illusion of destiny: the belief that “we ‘discover’ our identity with no room for any choice” (Sen 2005: 350).

Sen points out that the illusion of the simplicity of identity depends on points we overlook. These points, when stated, are obvious truths, but the truisms are given an edge by an example that testifies to the scale of the harm the illusion can bring about: “A Hutu from Kigali may be pressured to see himself only as a Hutu and incited to kill Tutsis, and yet he is not only a Hutu, but also a Kigalian, a Rwandan, an African, a laborer, and a human being.” This is one of many cases where so much horror would have been avoided if the illusion had been replaced by what Sen calls “the recognition of the plurality of our identities and their diverse implications” (Sen 2006: 4).

For Sen it is also important to challenge the illusion of destiny: “there is a critically important need to see the role of choice in determining the cogency and relevance of particular identities which are inescapably diverse” (2006: 4). The illusion that,
among the plurality of our identifying features, those that
constitute the core of our identity are destined rather than
chosen has the effect of “impoverishing the power and reach
of our social and political reasoning”. Through this it “exacts a
remarkably heavy price” (2006: 17). A reminder of some
aspects of the price is the justified protest of Richard Dawkins
that, since young children cannot decide for themselves about
religious beliefs, there is no such thing as a Christian child or
an Islamic child. There are only children of Christian or
Islamic parents (Dawkins 2006: 379–83) Part of this price is
the stifting of people’s freedom to think for themselves and to
create themselves. Part of it is seen in the tribal conflicts, both
national and religious, that kill so many people round the
world.

I agree with Amartya Sen both that these beliefs about the
simplicity and inevitability of identity are illusions, and that
they do enormous harm. So my aim in this chapter is only
marginally critical and mainly constructive. I hope to add to
the discussion of why these illusions have such power, in the
hope of weakening their grip. The approach will be by way of
asking two questions. First, why are certain of people’s
characteristics (ethnicity, nationality, language, religion, etc.)
so often taken by people to be central to their identity, in a
way that others (their job, height, taste in music, etc.) usually
are not? What is the hold of these characteristics on our sense
of who “we” are? And second, why is this hold on us so often
linked to violence between “us” and “them”?

(p.438) I. Identity and the Charged Characteristics
Why these characteristics? Why do nationality and religion, for
example, figure so large in people’s conception of their own
identity? What gives being Christian or Islamic, Russian or
Polish, the kind of emotional charge that makes a slight to the
group seem an attack on a person’s very core? Why is a
sneering remark about Polish plumbers more likely to anger
other Poles than other plumbers?

The conjecture I want to put forward is that part of the
explanation of these charged characteristics touches on two
very deep human needs. We want our life to add up to
something. And there is the need for recognition by others.
We want our lives to add up to something, and whether or not they do so is partly up to us. Of course, much in our lives is beyond our control. We do not choose when we are born, whether we are born male or female, whether we are born with or without medical problems, who our parents are, or the culture in which we grow up. But, despite the huge constraints on what choices are open to us, as we grow up most of us are able increasingly to shape the way our lives turn out and the kinds of people we are. There are the cards we are dealt but there is also how we decide to play them.

John Rawls suggested that people have a life plan (Rawls 1971: 407-16) But perhaps only a few philosophers and other obsessives have anything so explicit. The related projects of shaping our lives and shaping ourselves are, for most of us, most of the time, not things we are much conscious of. But still, at the back of our minds we often have an awareness of a vaguely spelt out narrative of our life, and of how its general direction is partly guided by things we care about. Galen Strawson has rightly pointed out that in this respect people differ psychologically. Some people may not think of their lives in terms of a narrative and this may not make their lives less good (Strawson 2005). And others may be too ground down by poverty, war or oppression to give attention to what their lives add up to. But, despite all this, how most people react when their autonomy is under threat brings out the importance of our intermittently conscious power partly to shape our own lives.

The charged characteristics that figure so much in people's sense of their own identity are often those intimately bound up with the narratives of their lives. Characteristically, a narrative is bound up with places: where we grew up, where we were in love, where our parents died or where our children were born. Part of the pain of exile is being cut off from all this. The narrative is also likely to be permeated by the beliefs and values (whether religious, moral or political) that give point to some of what we do. Most narratives are bound up with (a few) other people: often family or close friends. What I did was done with them, or in response to what they said or did. My values were partly shaped by them. Perhaps I still carry their hopes (p.439) and expectations with me. The narrative we
tell may sometimes partly have them as the imagined audience, to a degree we realize perhaps only when they die.

We often want recognition from other people. At the very minimum, we do not want others to look through us as if we were not there, as in the cruelty of ostracism. (The extreme of this cruelty is solitary confinement, where people are put away so they are not even seen.) The minimum is being noticed as a person, but we need more than this. We want people to see what we are like, what is distinctive about us. In this way the need for recognition is linked to caring that our lives add up to something. We want at least a few people close to us to notice how we are shaping our lives and ourselves. If this does not happen, our self-creation paints a picture no-one sees, or writes a novel no-one reads.

The list of charged characteristics typically includes the religious or other beliefs that have guided the choices in the narrative. It includes the places that have been important, and the language and culture shared by many who play a major part in it. A lot of the meaning of what we do derives from its context. So insults to the place where we grew up, or to our religion, or to our national or ethnic group, strike at much of what gives our personal narrative its sense.

Usually, many of the people close to us, on whose recognition we depend, have charged characteristics overlapping with ours. So insults to our nation, ethnicity or religion, or to our language or our country, also devalue the group whose responses validate our narrative.

If true, this conjecture, about the links between the charged characteristics and our deep need for meaning and for recognition, may partly explain why the hold on us of tribal loyalties is so strong. The grip of these loyalties is not just on those who are simple and unreflective. It can be seen in people who are fully aware of the harm done by the illusion of the simplicity of identity and by the illusion of destiny.

Few are more sophisticated about these illusions than Salman Rushdie. His family has Indian and Pakistani branches, and he has often found himself trying to erode the growing prejudices by explaining Indian or Pakistani attitudes to those on the other side. But he admits he has not always been entirely impartial: "I hate the way in which we, Indians and Pakistanis,
have become each other’s others, each seeing the other as it were through a glass, darkly, each ascribing to the other the worst motives and the sneakiest natures. I hate it, but in the last analysis I’m on the Indian side” (Rushdie 2002: 431.)

If Salman Rushdie cannot escape the bias towards “his” side, it is unlikely that many of the rest of us will find it easy to do so. Amartya Sen’s use of rational criticism to undermine illusions about identity is the beneficial performance of a necessary task. But the case of Salman Rushdie suggests that, even when rational argument has shown us that we see each other through a glass darkly, the glass may not immediately become clear. Part of the explanation may be that our own need for meaning and recognition continues to cast a darkening shadow of tribal identity.

(p.440) II. The Links Between Identity and Violence
What is it about the sense of tribal identity that leads to violence? The links depend on a complex interplay between our inner psychological dispositions and historical and social circumstances.

II.1 The Disposition to Group Hostility
Part of the inner psychology is a disposition towards group hostility that is independent of the charged characteristics and the sense of identity. It is a platitude that human beings are drawn to identify with the group they belong to, in ways linked to violence towards other groups. What is more surprising is that such violence sometimes breaks out where the groups are not marked off from each other by any ethnic, religious, or other charged characteristic.

Philip Zimbardo’s famous 1971 study of students in a “prisoners and prison officers” role-playing experiment showed violence between “minimal groups”: those whose differences are known to be marginal or non-existent. The study had to be called off after only a few days because the “guards” treated the “prisoners” with brutality, including sexual humiliations approaching those more recently in Abu Ghraib:
It is hard to imagine that such sexual humiliation could happen in only five days, when the young men all know that this is a simulated prison experiment. Moreover, initially they all recognized that the “others” were also college students like themselves. Given that they were all randomly assigned to play these contrasting roles, there were no inherent differences between the two categories. (Zimbardo 2007: 172)

Evolutionary psychologists have speculated that, in the Stone Age environment of early human hunter-gatherer tribes, a genetic disposition towards hostility to other groups may have been conducive to survival (Shaw and Wong 1988). Whether or not this is right, the Zimbardo study of violence between minimal groups does suggest a disposition to what can be called “basic group hostility”: a hostility to other groups that is independent of illusions about their characteristics and identity.

Obviously, not all contact between minimal groups elicits brutality and violence. A prison role-playing experiment is a very particular situation. One group is given nearly total power over the other. And the victim group is subjected to a dehumanizing anonymity of dress and behavior. Many ordinary situations do not bring out barbarism in the same way. Members of two different orchestras queueing up to leave coats in the cloakroom of a concert hall do not create a small Abu Ghraib. Their situation suppresses, or at least does not elicit, basic group hostility.

(p.441) The disposition the Zimbardo study tapped into is more likely to turn into violent conflict when links are made to our identity and its associated charged characteristics. We would be surprised to turn up for a concert to find that the members of one orchestra had killed half the members of another. It is less surprising when religious differences create a crusade or a jihad, or when ethnic or national differences create a war of conquest or of liberation.

But, normally, group hostility is not aroused simply by encounters between groups who see their identity in terms of different nationalities and religions. No alarm signals are triggered when half a hotel is taken by a busload of Italian Catholics and the other half by a busload of Swedish Protestants. The smoldering disposition to group hostility, even
when combined with charged identity differences, catches fire only in certain social and historical circumstances. Group narratives give a clue to which contexts make relations between groups more combustible.

II.2 Group Narratives

Indians, Russians or Greeks may think of themselves as each making up a distinct community. But, as Benedict Anderson has famously argued, nations are “imagined communities” (Anderson 1983). Russians are not a community in the way that people in a small village are. When the Russian nation is angry about some insult, this requires a degree of imaginative creation, usually helped along by television and newspapers. Nations are not the only imagined communities. The same goes for Christendom, the Islamic umma, the Greek Orthodox Church, and so on. Communities are created partly by actual social construction, such as the passing of laws, the use of a common currency, or the adoption of creeds. They are created partly by physical construction, such as the making of a transport system or the building of cathedrals, synagogues or mosques. They are created partly by individuals in a group constructing their own identities in parallel: through their supposed shared characteristics, again often helped by media orchestration.

This last part of the creation of an imagined community, the creation of a shared identity, is often greatly influenced by a shared history. The role of narrative in constructing group identity and in constructing personal identity is similar. Groups, like individuals, tell narratives about themselves and these narratives reinforce the conceptions they have of their own distinctive characteristics.

“Our” distinct features emerge in the narrative by means of the contrast with the features that emerge as typical of other groups. This need not carry any particular emotional coloring: “We fish; they are farmers”. But, of course, usually the narrative is a colored one: “We trusted them, but they let us down”; “They attacked us and we defended ourselves”. It is hard for a narrative to create a distinct identity which a group can be proud of without some implied contrast with the defects of others. It is a difficult conceptual feat to see ourselves as distinctively honest and brave without seeing our neighbors by comparison as treacherous cowards.
But here I want to focus on two more specific aspects of the link between narratives and conflict. One is the role of remembered harm, insult and—especially—humiliation. The other is a third illusion, perhaps worth adding to Amartya Sen’s illusions of the simplicity of identity and of destiny. This is the illusion of collective responsibility.

II.3 Remembered Harm, Insult and Humiliation: The Backlash

Remembered harm, betrayal, insult and humiliation often play an immensely powerful role in the narratives that motivate conflict. In the aftermath of Yugoslavia, Serbs, Croats and Bosnians made repeated references to episodes in their group narratives. Each group would remember being betrayed, ruled over, defeated or massacred by one of the other groups. The memories went back centuries. Some Serbs who commanded the war against Croatia, or who ran concentration camps for Croats, had seen their own parents killed by Croatian fascists, or had been children in Croatian concentration camps. Serbian atrocities against Croats in the 1990s were partly a backlash against these remembered atrocities.

The backlash against the experience of defeat and occupation is apparent in German nationalism. The influential German nationalist philosopher, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, gave the lectures later published as *Addresses to the German Nation* in French-occupied Berlin in 1807 (Fichte 1807/1968). Friedrich Schiller noted the response to defeat. His comparison was with walking through young trees that have bendy branches which spring back after being pushed aside. Isaiah Berlin, expounding this idea, calls it “the bent twig” (Berlin 1990), although “backlash” comes closer to suggesting the strength of the response.

The backlash was most striking after the defeat and harsh peace terms of 1918–19, with the forced acceptance of the humiliating “war guilt clauses”. It is impossible to read *Mein Kampf* without noticing Hitler’s constant boiling anger at all this. His rage was directed against the victorious Allies, but he also believed defeat was the result of treachery: the “stab in the back” for which he made Jews the scapegoat. The major theme of his life’s work after 1918 was to undo and avenge these humiliations.
The strength of the backlash may depend on effective propaganda. National revival to expunge the humiliation of 1918 was central to the Nazi message. It was a major theme of the Nuremberg rallies as portrayed by Leni Riefenstahl in *Triumph of the Will*. But successful propaganda needs to connect with feelings and thoughts people already have. This theme clearly found an echo in public opinion.

Part of the backlash against humiliation is the desire to retaliate in kind. After defeating France, Hitler devised a theatrical humiliation. He made the French (p.443) representatives sign the armistice at Compiègne where the Germans had signed after their defeat in 1918. The same railway carriage was used, with Hitler in the seat previously occupied by Marshal Foch.

II.4 The Backlash Now

The backlash against perceived humiliation is also central to some of the conflicts of our own time, notably the conflict of which 9/11 is a part, seen on one side as *jihad* and on the other as a war on terror. Neither side has noticed that the other side's actions are part of a backlash.

About a month after 9/11, Osama bin Laden made a statement broadcast by al-Jazeera:

> What America is tasting today is but a fraction of what we have tasted for decades. For over eighty years our *umma* has endured this humiliation and contempt. Its sons have been killed, its blood has been shed, its holy sanctuaries have been violated, all in a manner contrary to that revealed by God, without anyone listening or responding …But when after eighty years the sword comes down on America, the hypocrites rise up to lament these killers who have scorned the blood, honor, and holy places of Muslims. (Bin Laden 2005: 104)

Well before 9/11, Bin Laden saw terrorist attacks as a retaliation that would expunge the sense of humiliation. In 1997 he said, “We look upon those heroes, those men who undertook to kill the American occupiers in Riyadh and Khobar. We describe them as heroes and as men. They have wiped disgrace and submissiveness off the forehead of their nation” (2005: 51).
Bin Laden indicates that much of the sense of humiliation comes from parts of the Islamic world being occupied by American troops. As a result, he makes driving them out a central political goal. In 1998, he outlined the aims of the “World Islamic Front”: “To kill the Americans and their allies—civilian and military—is an individual duty incumbent on every Muslim in all countries, in order to liberate the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Holy Mosque from their grip, so that their armies leave all the territory of Islam, defeated, broken, and unable to threaten any Muslim” (2005: 61).

The hope that the Americans will leave defeated and broken reflects a familiar part of the backlash: the desire to repay humiliation in kind. For Bin Laden, this was one of the successes of 9/11. Looking back on the attackers, he said, “They rubbed America’s nose in the dirt, and wiped its arrogance in the mud. As the twin towers of New York collapsed, something even greater and more enormous collapsed with them: the myth of the great America and the myth of democracy ...It also became clear to people that America, this unjust power, can be struck down and humiliated” (2005: 194–5).

This same sense of 9/11 being a national humiliation was felt by many Americans, although they did not see it as destroying “the myth of democracy”, but as (p.444) something to be expunged and avenged. President Bush caught the mood when, speaking to a crowd at the ruined World Trade Center, he said, “I can hear you. The rest of the world hears you. And the people who knocked these buildings down will hear us all soon.”

The desire to repay humiliation in kind is visible in the war on terror. The war in Afghanistan was partly an attempt to stop Osama bin Laden and others in al-Qaeda from further terrorism by catching them. But there was also an expressive element to it. Dropping bombs with the initials of the New York Police Department on them must have been seen as part of ensuring that they “will hear us all soon”. Saddam Hussein was not involved in 9/11. But when he was captured, unkempt after living in his hole in the ground, to film him while the inside of his mouth was forcibly examined, was a kind of “retaliatory” humiliation.

II.5 The Illusion of Collective Responsibility
It is not just our own nation or group that forms an “imagined community”. We also project on to other groups a similar (though usually more negative) imaginary homogeneity. Especially when we are remembering some harm or humiliation inflicted on “us”, we are prey to the illusion of collective responsibility. “They” (all of them!) have these bad characteristics, which were expressed in what they did to us, and so they are all responsible. They all deserve what they get as a result.

This illusion is found in the leaders. When Osama bin Laden celebrates 9/11, it is “America” whose nose is rubbed in the dirt. But is it likely that, of the some 3,000 people he killed, all were supporters of American government interventions in the Islamic world? Did the Islamic Americans he killed deserve to have their noses “rubbed in the dirt”? What about the 86 people he killed who came from Japan, Colombia, Jamaica, Mexico and the Philippines? The celebration depends on belief in collective responsibility, which in turn depends on not asking these questions about the actual people who get killed.

And when President Bush targeted Afghanistan and Iraq as part of his “war on terror”, he was delivering on his promise that the people who knocked these buildings down “will hear us all soon”. But how many of the more than 3,000 Afghan civilians killed does this fit? Were there really more people in the 9/11 conspiracy than were killed by it? And the more than 600,000 people, according to some estimates, killed as a result of the Iraq war obviously were not all involved, and perhaps none of them were. Of course other motives were in play in the Iraq war: possibly to do with oil, possibly to do with gaining political dominance in the Middle East, possibly to do with removing a cruel dictator and installing democracy, and possibly to do with weapons of mass destruction. But one reason for early American support of the war was that it was hitting back at Iraq’s supposed implication in al-Qaeda terrorism. Among the false beliefs behind this thinking was the illusion of collective responsibility.

(p.445) This illusion is found not only in the leaders, but also in those who carry out the supposed acts of retribution. It is found in the videotape made by Mohammad Siddique Khan, one of the terrorist bombers who struck London on 7 July 2005. He was both British and Islamic, but his words made it clear that
his chosen identity was Islamic rather than British. “You” are the people of Britain and other Western countries involved in the Iraq war. “We” are Islamic people.

He said,

our words have no impact upon you, therefore I’m going to talk to you in a language that you understand. Our words are dead until we give them life with our blood … Your democratically elected governments continuously perpetrate atrocities against my people all over the world. And your support of them makes you directly responsible, just as I am directly responsible for protecting and avenging my Muslim brothers and sisters. Until we feel security, you will be our targets. And until you stop the bombing, gassing, imprisonment and torture of my people we will not stop this fight. We are at war and I am a soldier. Now you too will taste the reality of this situation. (Khan 2005)

The illusion of collective responsibility is linked to the idea that all members of the other group have shared (usually negative) characteristics. Here “you” (British people) are all impervious to the words of Islamic people and so “blood” is chosen as “a language you understand”. “Your” support of governments perpetrating atrocities against Islamic people “makes you directly responsible”.

With his bomb at Edgware Road Station, Mohammad Sidique Khan killed (apart from himself) six people. One question he might have asked about his potential victims is whether some of them might have been British and Islamic. Another is whether it was likely that all those he killed would be among the minority in Britain who supported the Iraq war. Another is whether the “you” he holds “directly responsible” would include those who took part in London’s (largest ever) political demonstration: the one against that war just before it started. The illusion of collective responsibility does not easily survive such questions.

The same illusion helps bring about the kinds of action that fed Mohammad Sidique Khan’s resentment. American troops back from Iraq have started to describe atrocities in which some of
them participated, together with the psychology behind them. According to one report,

The mounting frustration of fighting an elusive enemy and the devastating effect of roadside bombs, with their steady toll of American dead and wounded, led many troops to declare open war on all Iraqis. Veterans described reckless firing once they left their compounds. Some shot holes into cans of gasoline being sold along the roadside and then tossed grenades into the pools of gas to set them ablaze. Others opened fire on children. (Hedges and Al-Arian 2007: 3)

Some of the soldiers were troubled when, back in America, they thought about how they had felt and acted. One said that the general attitude was “A dead Iraqi is just another dead Iraqi” and explained this: “The soldiers honestly thought we were trying to help the people and they were mad because it was almost like a betrayal. (p.446) Like here we are trying to help you, here I am, you know, thousands of miles away from home and my family, and I have to be here for a year and work every day on these missions. Well, we're trying to help you and you just turn around and try to kill us.” Another said that “the frustration that resulted from our inability to get back at those who were attacking us led to tactics designed simply to punish the local population that was supporting them” (Hedges and Al-Arian 2007: 3, 4).

The illusion of collective responsibility behind waging open war on all Iraqis, and behind wanting to punish the local population, again relies on the collective “you”. Again the illusion would not survive such questions as whether the children fired on are really part of the “you” who “just turn around and try to kill us”.

The cycle of humiliation and retaliation, together with the linked illusion of collective responsibility, has marked the current conflict. Prisoners of one side may be beheaded, with the atrocity broadcast to the world. Prisoners of the other side may have their religion insulted and may themselves be tortured and sexually humiliated. It is easy to understand the feelings on each side of rage and vengeance. It is less easy to
see how to break out of this cycle, created by those on both sides who do not understand how it works.
III. The Enlightenment and the Psychology of Violence

Amartya Sen is right to stress the enormous harm done by the illusions about identity that he has identified. He is also right in exposing these illusions to rational criticism in the hope of weakening people's susceptibility to them. This kind of questioning and criticism has been the task of philosophy at least since Socrates. The line comes down to us through, among many others, the Stoics, Spinoza, Hume, Kant, Mill and Russell. It was particularly at the time of the Enlightenment that the tradition of rational criticism took on a strongly social dimension. Hume, Adam Smith, Diderot, Condorcet, Kant and others, despite their differences on the relative role of reason and the emotions, shared the belief that reason could change the world. There was optimism that challenging the illusions of religion could lead to new and better foundations for morality and politics. Sen's rational arguments against the illusions of identity are squarely in this great tradition.

In some ways, my proposed additions to his account of these illusions and violence present a darker picture. Sen is right that we do not have to accept an identity mainly conceived in terms of religion, nationality or ethnicity. But, if the suggestion here about the role of some of these categories in our psychology is right, even the strongest skeptical arguments may have limited effectiveness. (This does not mean (p.447) we should give up making the rational case against the grip of these entrenched categories.) The other suggestion is about the cycle of mutual humiliation and backlash: about how easy it is for groups to get trapped in this cycle and how hard it is to escape from it. This too supports a less optimistic picture.

At this point, I want briefly to add something to a continuing conversation Amartya Sen and I have been having over the last few years. The conversation is about the Enlightenment, and about reason and the emotions. His article “The Reach of Reason”, first published in the New York Review of Books in 2000 (repr. in Sen 2005), was in part a generous review of my book Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century. At one point, he took me to task for being unfair to the Enlightenment thinkers, including the book in the class of “attacks on ethics based on reason” (Sen 2005: 277). My book laid great emphasis on the importance of sympathy and imagination as barriers against atrocity. Sen justifiably suggested that I should have considered the emphasis given to sympathy and other emotional responses by David Hume and
Adam Smith, before criticizing “the thin, mechanical psychology of the Enlightenment”. He also criticized my comment that “Stalin and his heirs were in thrall to the Enlightenment”.

He then made the point that recently the Enlightenment perspective has come under severe attack—he mentioned John Gray—and suggested that I had added my voice to this reproach. When I read this I was a bit dismayed that I had expressed my intentions so unclearly that even a sympathetic and acute critic saw them in this way.

The point I had hoped to make about Stalin and his heirs, such as Pol Pot, was about overconfidence in their ability to produce blueprints of a totally redesigned society. Like many, I am inspired by Vico’s thought that “the social world is certainly the work of men”, with its implication that the way a society is set up does not have to be seen as part of the order of nature, but can be changed in ways that may allow people to be less cramped and more fulfilled. Perhaps Vico is only controversially an Enlightenment thinker, but this idea seems to me a core Enlightenment idea, and one that is visible in the Communist project.

My criticism is that the total redesign of a society is too grandiose. Such a project is dangerously overconfident and carries with it the risk of things going wrong on a huge scale. And this is especially so when the blueprint is taken as dogma, rather than as something experimental, to be changed or abandoned in the light of feedback that things are not going well. This attack on crude attempts at the rational reconstruction of society was not intended as an attack on reason itself. As I said in my book, “Rationality is saved by its own open-endedness. If a strategy of following accepted rules of rationality is sometimes self-defeating, this is not the end. We revise the rules to take account of this, so producing a higher-order rational strategy” (Glover 1999: 232).

Like Amartya Sen, at a deep level I am on the side of the Enlightenment. The attempt to free morality and politics from religion is one of the great advances (p.448) in the history of human consciousness. And the idea that we can create a better and more humane world through rational criticism of enslaving prejudices and illusions is one that Sen and I both support. But the complications I have tried to add here to his
picture, and the study of the psychology of atrocities presented in the book he reviewed, are intended to suggest that the obstacles (whether coming from overconfident versions of rationalism or from dark, irrational parts of our nature) may be more daunting than Enlightenment optimism suggests.

The other issue is about whether the psychological views of the Enlightenment thinkers are too simple to give adequate guidance in morals and politics. Adam Smith did indeed write with sensitivity and subtlety about sympathy and imagination. But I do not think he saw the horrors that might come from the darker side of our psychology: from our intermittent love of cruelty, our obedience, our conformity, and our sometimes rigid ideological commitments. Nor did he see the deep roots of our tribal commitments or the psychological importance of defeat and humiliation in generating a self-sustaining cycle of violence.

If the point about humiliation and the cycle of violence is right, it does darken the Enlightenment picture of human nature and of our prospects. But, at the same time, it gives a new argument in support of one of the most visionary political proposals of the Enlightenment: Immanuel Kant’s proposal for a world federation of states, which he thought should be given a monopoly of military force (Kant 1970).

The problem of how to police the world and its conflicts is heightened both by modern technology and by our getting closer to being a global village. Because they cause death and suffering on such a scale, the continuing occurrence of war, massacre and genocide has long been a scandal to the human race. But now different groups are so interconnected that the hatreds created by one conflict can create “enemies” all over the globe. An obvious case is the Israeli—Palestinian conflict, whose poison infects so many relations between Western countries and Islamic ones. With the spread of nuclear weapons, and their increasing portability, it may become all too easy for quite small groups to do harm to their supposed enemies in many parts of the world on a much greater scale than that of 9/11.

How should we try to eliminate, or at least contain, violent conflict between groups? Probably the ideal solution would be one in which rational criticism had persuaded us all to give up
the illusions on which ethnic, national, political or religious tribalism depend. Those of us who see the illusions for what they are should certainly continue with the long, slow strategy of questioning and argument. Some of the deepest changes in the world are caused by the evolution of beliefs and attitudes, even when this happens with glacial slowness.

But that slowness means that our response to group conflict cannot wait for these long-term psychological changes that may eliminate it. It is so far from being eliminated that we need ways of containing and policing it now. We are often told, and we partly believe, that we live in a global village. How should the global village respond to the outbreak of violent conflict? Actual villages are of two kinds. In some villages, when violence breaks out people call the police, who have legal authority and enough force to impose the rule of law. In the other kind of village, there is no impartial authority strong enough to prevent violence. The only way to stop it is for the strongest and best-armed neighbors to form a posse and to use their force to keep the peace. Our world hovers between partial attempts to become the law-governed village and what most often is the reality of the lawless one.

Kant's idea is the model of the law-governed global village. He saw that the strong desire of so many groups to have their own nation-state makes a complete world government unrealistic. Instead, he advocated a federation of all the nation-states. The states would give the world federation a monopoly of the use of military force, parallel to the monopoly of force given to the police in a law-governed village, city or state. The United Nations is the embryonic form of such a scheme, but at present it falls far short of it. To turn it into the Kantian world federation, there would need to be a legal constitution spelling out when it should or should not use military force, together with a world court to authorize the use of force in particular cases. And nation-states would have to give up having independent military forces.

In our present world, Kant's idea still seems utopian to most people who hear of it. There is an influential school of political thinkers who argue that, in international affairs, it is impossible or undesirable to have any genuine rule of impartial law. In the view of these self-styled “realists”, peace can only be kept by the domination of the strongest power or
group. In the global village violence by others is stamped out by the strongest family (currently America), either on its own or by rounding up a posse (a “coalition of the willing”).

Among the weaknesses of this approach are issues of authority and impartiality. The world has never asked America, or its allies, or NATO, to be world policeman. Interventions by a self-appointed country or group of countries will be seen as self-interested. Those intervening will also be seen as lawless: not as the police but as an armed gang. (The Iraq war gives some support to this.) Even if violence by others is successfully defeated, this is unlikely to be the end of the matter. If the "backlash" psychology outlined here is right, the result is more likely to be vendetta and a cycle of violence. (The claim that the Iraq war has created more terrorists is relevant here.) No doubt police forces are imperfect and what they do is often resented. But, where a police force manages a decent approximation to impartiality, vendettas against them are far less likely than vendettas against rival gangs.

It has been argued here that humiliation and the backlash against it are central to violent conflict. This makes it highly likely that any intervention by nations or groups of nations to impose solutions will in turn generate a backlash. Without the legitimacy given by being part of an accepted international authority, those imposing a solution can hardly avoid being seen as victors and occupiers. Lasting peace may not survive the propensity of the defeated and the occupied to hit back. International authorities, like police forces, have their own problems. But the present state of the world makes vivid the possibly greater problems of a world without any legitimately enforceable rule of law.

Perhaps it is only a short-term and narrow version of realism that prefers the posse to the police. A darker view of human psychology may not show that Hobbes, Machiavelli and Clausewitz were wiser than Kant. The pessimistic view sketched here of the strength of human irrational passions may, surprisingly, add to the rational case for one of the Enlightenment's finest and most optimistic ideas.

IV. Endnote
I first got to know Amartya Sen when we both worked in Oxford and used to talk as we traveled back together on the train to our homes in London. Sometimes he generously gave
me a ride back from Paddington Station to my house in his car, driven at hair-raising speed. One day, before he had published *Poverty and Famines*, he opened my eyes to the fact that famines typically happen when there is enough food for everyone to eat, but when many people are denied access to it, often through poverty. This was one of a number of the most stimulating conversations of my life that took place on train journeys with this amiably argumentative Indian.

Of course it is against the spirit of his work simply to classify him as an argumentative Indian. Parts of his identity include being an economist, a philosopher, a parent, a Harvard professor, an egalitarian, a fan of Satyajit Ray, an inspiring teacher, a Nobel Prize winner, a former Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, a member (according to his Hindu grandfather) of the atheistic part of the Hindu spectrum, an unfailingly courteous listener, and a slightly alarming driver.

Despite all this, I will settle here for the “argumentative Indian” phrase I have borrowed from him (though of course he does not use it about himself). The emphasis here is on the adjective rather than the noun. Consider some of the results of the arguing: broadening and humanizing the foundations of economics; persuasively reviving the case against economic inequality; providing a strong alternative to utilitarian thinking in development economics and elsewhere; transforming our view of how to prevent famine; inventing a more flexible version of rights theory; using demographic figures to show in detail how women are failed by many cultures; arguing against deference to the cultural traditions responsible for these failures; producing a powerful case for political freedom as promoting rather than hindering economic development; challenging the illusions about identity that contribute to violent conflict. It is not a bad demonstration of what one argumentative Indian can do.

Bibliography references:


KHAN, MOHAMMAD SIDIQUE (2005), “We are at War ...I am a Soldier”, available at www.informationclearinghouse.info/article10079.htm.


—— (2005), The Argumentative Indian (London: Allen Lane).


Access brought to you by: