

Duties of Social Identity? Intersectional Objections to Sen's Identity Politics

Abstract

Amartya Sen (2006) argues that sectarian discord and violence are often attributable, in part, to the pervasive tendency to see ourselves as members of a single social group standing in opposition to other groups (Sunni vs. Shia, East vs. West, etc.). Sen thus argues that we must recognize that we inevitably belong to many different groups (e.g., ethnic groups, socioeconomic classes) and that we are obligated to choose, in any given context, which among our multiple affiliations to prioritize. We argue that Sen's account is both descriptively and normatively flawed, and overlooks significant lessons from feminist thinkers. Sen's account is descriptively flawed because it wrongly assumes that individuals' identity affiliations are in-principle separable for purposes of practical deliberation. It is normatively flawed, first, because requiring individuals to prioritize among "identities" that are not actually separable is unfair, and, second, because this obligation often reinforces structural injustices.

Main text

In *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*, Amartya Sen argues that, "the main hope of harmony in our troubled world lies in the plurality of our identities" (2006, 16). By this he means that we must resist the tendency to cast others and ourselves as members of one and only one social group, which is pitted against other groups, such as Democrat vs. Republican, Muslim vs. Christian, or Hutu vs. Tutsi. Sen claims that this "singular" conception of social identity is not just conceptually impoverished, but plays a pivotal role in the incitement of sectarian discord and

violence (xii). He urges, first, that we recognize the plurality of social identity—we inevitably belong to many groups, e.g., race, class, gender, nationality, and religion—and, second, that each of us take responsibility for choosing which of our group affiliations to prioritize at any given time. In this way, Sen attempts to acknowledge the importance of social identity and group belonging to a well-lived life, but to avoid the tendency to treat identity as “destiny,” that is, to think that our membership in a single salient social group, such as religion, uniquely determines our political orientation. He thus attempts to do justice to the strong bonds of social identity while leaving sufficient room for individual liberty.

While Sen’s attempt to balance the values of group affiliation and individual liberty is admirable, and clearly preferable to the singular conception of social identity, his account is both descriptively and normatively flawed. First, Sen’s “pluralist” conception fails as a theory of identity; it wrongly assumes that individuals’ various group affiliations are in-principle separable for the purposes of practical deliberation, e.g., that one can, as a rule, prioritize one’s racial identity above or below one’s gender identity. Second, Sen’s contention that individuals are *obligated* to choose how to prioritize their various group affiliations fails as a general normative requirement. Requiring individuals to “choose” among their putatively “competing” identities can be profoundly unjust, both because, in at least some cases, these identities are not actually separable, and because such choices obscure the distinctive injustices suffered by members of multiple disadvantaged groups, such as women of color living in poverty. Even if these identities were in-principle separable, requiring such individuals to choose to prioritize the fight against racism, sexism, or poverty may simply compound the injustices they suffer. In what follows, we explain Sen’s theory (§1), elaborate our objections (§§2-3), and sketch a more promising

alternative (§4).

1. Sen's Account of Social Identity

Sen begins by acknowledging the importance of social identity for “a sense of belonging to a community”:

A sense of identity can be a source not merely of pride and joy, but also of strength and confidence... The sense of identity can make an important contribution to the strength and the warmth of our relations with others...and can help to take us beyond our self-centered lives. (1, 2)

In light of the contributions that social identity makes to a well-lived life, Sen notes that, “it would make little sense to treat identity as a general evil” (4).

Nevertheless, Sen believes much of our thinking about social identity lies in “conceptual disarray” (165). We routinely overestimate the political and cultural differences between members of different groups, and underestimate the extensive heterogeneity among members within groups (11). In particular, Sen bemoans “the illusion of singular identity” (8), the pervasive tendency to assume that individuals are members of one and only one relevant social group, which is unchosen, and which effectively determines in advance all of their political allegiances and priorities. Sen aims, therefore, to do justice to the value of social identity without “incarcerating people within the enclosure of a singular identity” (15).

To this end, Sen defends a *pluralist* account of social identity, which we dub “identity pluralism.” He notes that we each have many different identities:

I can be, at the same time, an Asian, an Indian citizen, a Bengali with Bangladeshi ancestry, an American or British resident, an economist, a dabbler in philosophy, an author, a Sanskritist, a strong believer in secularism and democracy, a man, a feminist, a heterosexual, a defender of gay and lesbian rights, with a nonreligious lifestyle, from a

Hindu background, a non-Brahmin, and a nonbeliever in an afterlife. (2007, 19)¹

Sen distinguishes between chosen and “discovered” identities. Some identities are a matter of discovery, of finding out who we already are. For instance, we were already Americans before we discovered as much. By contrast, many social identities are, or at least can be, chosen, such as being a Democrat, a vegetarian, a teacher, or an expatriate. Sen argues, moreover, that we are not wholly without choice even in the cases of discovered identity.

In particular, Sen emphasizes what we call “identity prioritization”: making choices about the “relative importance” of our multiple identities (5). Prioritization is a two-step process. First, “we have to decide on what our relevant identities are... whether a particular group to which we belong is—or is not—important for us” (24, 39). For example, an individual may identify as an American without assigning much importance to this fact, e.g., without being nationalistic, patriotic, or otherwise active in American politics. Second, we have to weigh “the *relative* importance of these different identities. Both tasks demand reasoning and choice” (24, emphasis added). For example, Vivian identifies as a vegan but faces many choices about how important this identity is relative to others. When Vivian adopts a finicky cat, she may decide, in light of her commitment to the well-being of her pet and the dearth of evidence surrounding the viability of a vegan feline diet, to feed the cat animal products rather than experiment with vegan cat food.

How we weigh the relative importance of our identities is context-dependent. In some contexts, the most relevant category will be obvious. When there is only one vegan option on the menu, Vivian may prioritize her vegan identity and order that option. In other contexts, the choice might not be straightforward. Vivian may need to weigh her identity as an opponent of

¹ Many of Sen’s examples of “identities” in lists such as this might be better thought of as *beliefs* or *values*, rather than identities (e.g., being a supporter of democracy and LGBT rights is arguably not the same sort of “identity” as being Asian or heterosexual). We lack the space to properly address this complex issue, and so follow Sen in speaking of these categories as social identities.

animal cruelty against her identity as an environmentalist (if, e.g., she discovers that the vegan option uses ingredients not farmed or transported in a sustainable way). Since she identifies with veganism *and* environmentalism, she must deliberate and decide which aspect of her identity to prioritize.

Sen's account of prioritization leads to the crux of his normative claims about social identity. Sen portrays the normative status of identity prioritization in at least two different ways. At times, he seems to construe prioritization in terms of *political liberty*, for instance, when he writes, "The freedom to determine our loyalties and priorities between the different groups to which we may belong is a peculiarly important liberty which we have reason to recognize, value, and defend" (5, see also 38). Passages like this suggest that each individual should be free to prioritize her group affiliations as she sees fit. No one should be coerced or misled into thinking that mere membership in a certain social group determines all of her political allegiances and priorities. We are sympathetic with this thought and develop a somewhat similar view in §4.

More often, however, Sen characterizes prioritization as a matter of *personal responsibility*, an "exacting and extremely important" obligation (8). Sen takes it to follow from identity pluralism not just that we (can) sometimes make choices about how to prioritize among our social identities, but that we are under virtually omnipresent "responsibilities of choice and reasoning" to do so, i.e., that we are repeatedly called on to deliberate and decide how to weigh our various identities in any given situation (xiii).

2. Descriptive Flaws

Sen correctly identifies some inadequacies of the singular conception of social identity—in fact, the singular conception is so obviously false that it is perhaps more appropriate to construe it as an assemblage of cognitive biases, or even just a demagogic rhetorical maneuver, rather than a full-blown theory that anyone earnestly defends. However, Sen’s pluralist alternative is both descriptively and prescriptively flawed. In this section, we discuss descriptive flaws, and question the very idea that we can, in the context of practical deliberation, cleanly separate out and weigh our various social identities. Elizabeth Spelman (1988) elucidates some of these difficulties through a variety of thought experiments, such as:

If it were possible to isolate a woman’s “womanness” from her racial identity, then we should have no trouble imagining that had I been Black I could have had just the same understanding of myself as a woman as I in fact do, and that no matter how differently people would have treated me had I been Black, nevertheless what it would have meant to them that I was a woman would have been just the same. To rehearse this imaginary situation is to expose its utter bizarreness. (1988, 135)

Here, Spelman suggests that her white racial identity (her experience of being white, her understanding of what it is to be white, her beliefs about what whiteness is) conditions and is conditioned by her identity as a woman.

Spelman takes these cases to have a metaphysical upshot, and to undermine theories of social identity like Sen’s pluralism. Spelman rejects the notion that:

a woman’s identity consists of a sum of parts neatly divisible from one another, parts defined in terms of her race, gender, class, and so on... [and that] the oppressions she is subject to are (depending on who she is) neatly divisible into racism, sexism, classism, or homophobia, and that in her various political activities she works clearly now out of one part of herself, now out of another. (1988 136)

One woman might, for example, perceive some forms of treatment as threats to her femininity that a woman with a different set of traits (race, ethnicity, etc.) would not. For Spelman, then, our identities are *at base* a combination of their various aspects such that there is no way to factor them out, let alone to deliberate about which identity to prioritize when. If this is right, it is, at

least in certain central cases, simply impossible to engage in the kind of prioritization advocated by Sen.

Spelman's conclusions may, however, be too strong. While Spelman suggests that coherently separating out our racial and gender identities might be conceptually or metaphysically impossible, effectively on a par with thinking of oneself as a bachelor without thinking of oneself as unmarried, it might simply be extremely *difficult* to do so (Mikkola 2006). Spelman takes the intractability of separating out identities to speak against a certain metaphysics of social identity (e.g., essentialism or realism about gender and race), but one might instead take these considerations to have a merely epistemic upshot, which is perhaps less extreme but ultimately no less damaging for Sen's account. Even if, as a metaphysical matter, our various social identities are in-principle separable, the facts about these identities (and what it would mean to prioritize one over another) may often be out of our epistemic reach. It may just be prohibitively difficult to know that we are prioritizing one identity over another.

3. Normative Flaws

The problems with Sen's account do not lie exclusively or even primarily with the conceptual or epistemic difficulties regarding distilling and ranking our various group affiliations. Even if it were always straightforward to tease out the various strands of our social identity, being required to choose which strand to prioritize can be profoundly unjust. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) describes various ways in which women of color in the United States are unfairly expected to choose between promoting gender and race equality. She explains that they often find themselves:

situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas. The need to split one's political energies between two sometimes opposing groups is a dimension of intersectional disempowerment that men of color and white women seldom confront. (1991, 1252)

While Crenshaw does not argue that feminist and antiracist political movements are “primarily” responsible for the difficulties faced by women of color, they compound these difficulties precisely by framing blackness and womanhood as an “either/or proposition” (1242). Presenting women of color with this forced choice relegates to the margins their distinctive social experiences and disadvantages. So where Sen seeks to demonstrate the “power in *competing* identities” (4, original emphasis), Crenshaw explains how women of color suffer disempowerment and marginalization precisely because their race and gender affiliations are construed as competing.

Perhaps the most straightforward of Crenshaw's examples of the injustice of forced prioritization is her (1989) discussion of *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors* (1976). A group of black women alleged that GM discriminated against them by failing to hire any black women before 1964 and by firing all the black women hired after 1970 when GM downsized. Noting that GM had hired women and blacks (white women and black men!), the district court issued a summary judgment that black women are not “a special class to be protected from discrimination” (*Degraffenreid*, 413 F Supp at 143, cited in Crenshaw 1989, 141). The plaintiffs had to prove “race discrimination, sex discrimination, or alternatively either, but not a combination of both” (*ibid*). In this case, the plaintiffs were legally required to choose between prioritizing the fight against racism or against sexism, but being forced to so choose arguably *is* an injustice—or at least, such cases make clear that identity prioritization, even if possible, is no panacea for the ills of social identity.

More recently, Gloria Steinem's (2008) editorial endorsement of Hilary Clinton over Barack Obama arguably construed race and gender as competing. Steinem questioned whether a black woman with as much professional experience as Obama would have so quickly become a "viable candidate" for president. "Gender is probably the most restricting force in American life," wrote Steinem. "Black men were given the vote a half-century before women of any race." Steinem misleadingly cited the hardships of black women to argue that sexism is more "restricting" than racism, and ultimately to encourage women (and men) of all races to elect a white woman over a black man. Citing black women's hardships to illustrate sexism *as opposed to* racism arguably exemplifies an "illusion of identity" broadly of a piece with the abuses of identity-based thinking of concern to Sen. Notably, Steinem did not consider whether a *black* woman with *Clinton's* professional experience would be a viable candidate.

4. An Alternative Model

Sen vacillates between portraying identity prioritization as a liberty that ought to be respected by others and as an obligation to be taken up by each individual. Our concerns lie primarily with the latter portrayal. It is not the case that individuals are under a general obligation to prioritize among their social identities—sometimes this might be effectively impossible, sometimes unfair—but, where possible, they should certainly be free to do so. For example, prioritizing veganism over environmentalism *might* be more feasible than prioritizing race over gender.

The imperative, then, is to let individuals speak for themselves when it comes to their identities. The stress should be on the obligation to *defer* to others' self-conceptions, and not to coerce or mislead them into prioritizing specific identities or values over others. We thus join

Sen in opposing “the surgical implantation of a ‘real me’ by others who are determined to make us different from what we think we are” (2006, 8). Sen’s own account of pluralism and prioritization, however, itself reflects a problematic imposition on individuals who may experience the various aspects of their social identity as intersecting rather than competing.

It is, moreover, misleading to characterize the liberty in question primarily in terms of choosing between and prioritizing among identities. While we agree with Sen that individuals should have the freedom to speak for themselves when it comes to identity, only a subset of these cases involve an individual choosing priorities from a prior menu of identity options. Note also that Sen’s choice-based model cannot be salvaged by simply adding more (intersectional) options to the identity menu, e.g., by requiring someone to choose between prioritizing her womanhood, her blackness, or her black-womanhood. Such a choice would face many of the same conceptual, epistemic, and normative difficulties described earlier. What would it even mean to choose, say, her womanhood over her black-womanhood, or vice versa? Why assume that requiring such a choice would be fair?

We propose, instead, that the freedom of social identity is, in its broadest form, a matter of open-ended interpretation and reflective endorsement. For both chosen and discovered identities, individuals should have the liberty to interpret and reflectively endorse the meaning of those identities for themselves. The distinction between a social category and its “meaning” (which is Crenshaw’s term, 1991, 1297) can be characterized roughly as between the term (or mental representation) that picks out a set of individuals and the community’s conception of (or set of beliefs about) those individuals (see, e.g., Mallon 2003). Thus, an individual might reflectively endorse membership in a category (e.g., being a woman), but reject (some of) the putative meaning of that category (e.g., opting not to dress in a traditionally feminine manner).

The task is not for each individual to prioritize her identity affiliations, but to respect the affiliations and self-interpretations of others. Insofar as a black woman reflectively endorses her membership in both categories, she should not be asked to decide which identity is more important to her. She should be free to endorse meanings of blackness and womanhood that make it the case that she does not have to choose between them.

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