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Violence, Identity, and Poverty

Reviewed by Vicheth Sen

Abstract

Sen, A. (2008). Violence, identity and poverty. *Journal of Peace Research*, *45*(1), 5-15.

Amartya Sen's "Violence, Identity and Poverty" (2008) is a readable article which provides a critical analysis of two approaches to understanding the causes of violence in today's world. One is the "civilizational approach" and the other is the "political economy approach." The former, popularized by Samuel Huntington, seeks to explain violence as a result of a "clash of civilizations", whilst the latter points to "poverty and inequality" as the main culprit. By reading this article, one will gain a better understanding of these two approaches to explaining the causes of violence in the present global society and of the strengths and weaknesses of each. Because of the highly complex nature of violence, however, neither approach on its own is sufficient to fully explain why violence is a main feature of our lives; instead both need to be clearly understood to treat the causes of violence in the contemporary world.

The Civilizational Approach

The "civilizational approach" to explaining violent conflict stems from Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis, in which the world is conceived as being composed of several large and hostile civilizational blocks, each with their own histories and values. While this approach has already been thoroughly criticized by other scholars, including Edward Said, Sen offers some new insights worthy of consideration as well. First, "civilizations" are defined so narrowly that they only cover religions (p. 5) – the idea being that because of different characteristics and philosophical principles inherent to each religion, they tend to "clash with each other" (p. 6), and violence ensues. Defined this way, different civilizations are merely referred to as different religions such as Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and so on, a fundamental flaw which privileges religious institutions above other aspects which may be more relevant to understanding conflict, including economic and political arrangements. Sen is right, therefore, in arguing that the definition of civilizations in this analysis is too limited.

Another factor which makes the civilizational approach so limiting is the "oddly artificial view of history" on which the analysis is based (p. 6). This is a misunderstanding of how civilizations are formed. According to this view, Sen explains, civilizations have had virtually no contact with one another and have developed in isolation, and when they face each other, they tend to clash with each other because of these isolated geneses. However, this view seems to hold little truth in the real history. No civilization has grown without extensive interaction with or influence from one or more other civilizations. Certainly, there have been significant "movements of ideas and influences across the borders of countries" in a wide range of areas (p. 6), without which these supposedly "distinct" civilizations could not have developed the way they did.

Another limitation of the civilizational approach is the belief that human beings tend to have hostile attitudes toward people from other cultures or "foreigners." This idea seems to overlook a great many of

works on history by many world-renowned historians. For thousands of years, Sen argues, many historical authors have written about different countries in the world with a view to promoting an appreciation of those countries and their respective cultures and to "reducing prejudice and tension" (p. 6). Although Sen's argument on this point is interesting, it is not altogether convincing, as there are times when certain differing values are undeniably in conflict with each other, and the fact that "prejudice and tension" are so rampant across human cultures that writers and educators so often try to reduce them seems to actually support the civilizational view.

More convincing is Sen's treatment identities within the civilizational approach, which necessarily reduces the complexity and multiplicity of individual identities. Sen explains that this perception probably results from the use of a "solitarist approach" to understanding the identity of human beings, limiting each individual to a single (and narrowly understood) "civilization". In reality, however, no individual has only a single identity; rather, each person belongs to many different groups. Each group ascribes our status and gives us another dimension of our identities; moreover, we have different identities at different times or we may have two or more identities at the same time. As Sen puts it, "in our daily lives, we see ourselves as members of a variety of groups—we belong to all of them" (p. 6).

This part of Sen's analysis could have been even stronger, however, had he emphasized the point that not only individuals have multiple identities, but so do cultures or civilizations. As Edward Said has pointed out, this plurality within cultures is not some insignificant point that can be ignored; rather, it represents the "major contest in most modern cultures" (Said, 2001). Indeed, the internal struggle over "the definition or interpretation of each culture", the dissent and deviance within each society, is what drives the evolution of each culture or civilization (Said, 2001). Sen does make this point earlier, while arguing that civilizations are more than religions, but further emphasis during the discussion of identities would have been well advised.

The Political Economy Approach

The other approach discussed in Sen's article is the "political economy approach." This approach claims that today's global violence results from "poverty and inequality" (p. 7). A number of examples and studies from history have provided evidence concerning this causal relationship. As indicated by Sen, the violence in such countries as Afghanistan, Sudan, Somalia, Haiti, and even France has been evoked to prove that social and economic inequality has resulted in "bloody rebellion" (p. 8) or violence. This is an argument which is favored by many social scientists (p. 8). This poverty-violence relationship, Sen explains, has resulted in the development of policies to alleviate poverty for the sake of getting rid of violence. Poverty eradication has been supported by advocacy groups who see this as the best way to end all violence. For this reason, economic development and poverty removal have been at the forefront of the development agendas in many poor countries. However, if this causal linkage between poverty and violence is proved to be groundless, according to Sen, then social advocacy for poverty alleviation will be largely discredited. Although poverty itself can be considered a form of violence (Galtung, 1969), Sen's suggestion that anti-poverty advocacy groups should base their argument on moral reasoning rather than on ending political violence and social disorders is well taken.

Sen argues that claiming that poverty is responsible for violence is an "oversimplification of empirical connections that are far from universal" (p. 9). In fact, given the complexity of the world we live in, this causal relationship is not that simple. Sen states that there are many other factors, such as "political, social and cultural circumstances," (p. 9) which play a significant role in this relationship. Calcutta and South Africa are two of the instances Sen uses in his article to support his argument. Calcutta, one of the poorest cities in India, and therefore in the world, has an extremely low rate of crime and violence, an example which shows that poverty does not automatically lead to violence. In contrast, South Africa is relatively better off, showing that social, political and cultural factors are the major causes of violent crime.

Sen comes to a conclusion that neither approach—the clash of civilizations, nor the political economy—is

sufficient to explain the causes of violence and the absence of peace in today's world. Violence is a highly complex and multi-faceted issue; therefore, only by looking at the issue from different perspectives will we have a better image of this complex picture. In brief, Sen summarizes the main points that he believes should to be taken into serious consideration when trying to understand the causes of violence. First, social, cultural and economic factors have to be understood as an integrated picture, because each does not work in isolation to cause violence. Next, a better understanding of the multiplicity of identities can result in the reduction of violence. Third, not only religions but also other divisions can lead to violence. Last, poverty is more often a cause of violence when it is linked with another social inequality such as racial inequality, and should be reduced for other reasons too.

Everything being considered, I highly recommend this article. It is an important contribution to our understanding of the highly complex nature of violence and provides us with a pair of different lenses with which to zoom in on the causes of violence in contemporary society. While there are certainly more explanations of conflict to be considered beyond these two, Sen's analysis is clear and relevant, making this article a good read for those who are taking courses in peace and conflict studies as well as those who are working in this field.

Footnotes

Galtung, J. (1969). Violence, peace, and peace research. *Journal of Peace Research*, *6*(3), 167-191.

Said, E. W. (2001, October 4). The clash of ignorance. *The Nation*. Retrieved September 30, 2008, from www.thenation.com

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