

## Other People

On 7 November 2000 **Professor Amartya Sen, FBA** delivered the fourth Annual British Academy Lecture. In the extract below, Professor Sen considers various aspects of identity.

In 1998 the Academy launched a major new lecture series, the annual keynote British Academy Lecture, to mark the move to Carlton House Terrace. Lectures are intended to address a wider audience than the purely scholarly and to advance public understanding of the subjects the Academy exists to promote

Let me begin with the notion of ‘plural identity’. This is not, of course, a new subject, and many writers have discussed with much clarity the limitation of the presumption – often made implicitly – in identity politics and in identity-based philosophy that a person belongs only to one community or group. Surely any claim of exclusivity of this kind cannot but be manifestly absurd. We invoke group identities of various kinds in very many disparate contexts, and the language of our communications reflects this diversity in the different ways in which phrases like ‘my people’ are used. A person can be a Nigerian, an Ibo, a British citizen, a US resident, a woman, a philosopher, a vegetarian, a Christian, a painter, and a great believer in aliens who ride on UFOs – each of these groups giving the person a particular identity which may be invoked in particular contexts.

Sometimes an identity group – the idea of ‘my people’ – may even have a very fleeting and highly contingent existence. Mort Sahl, the American comedian, is supposed to have responded to the intense tedium of a four-hour-long film, directed by Otto Preminger, called *Exodus* (dealing with Jewish migration), by demanding on behalf of his fellow sufferers: ‘Otto, let my people go!’ That group of tormented film-goers did have reason for fellow feeling, but one can see the contrast between such an ephemeral group and the well-defined and really tyrannized community led by Moses – the original subject of that famous entreaty.

There are many groups to which a person belongs. It is useful to distinguish between ‘competing’ and ‘non-competing’ identities. The different groups may belong to the same category, dealing with the same kind of membership (such as citizenship), or to different categories (such as citizenship, class, gender, or profession). In the former case, there is some ‘competition’ between different groups within the same category, and thus between the different identities with which they are associated. In contrast, when we deal with groups classified on different bases (such as profession and citizenship), there may be no real competition between them as far as ‘belonging’ is concerned.

However, even though these non-competing identities are not involved in any territorial dispute as far as belonging is concerned, they can compete with each other for our attention and priorities. When one has to do one thing or another, the loyalties can conflict between giving priority to, say, race, or religion, or political commitments, or professional obligations, or friendship. And in that context, to be guided by only one particular identity (say, race), oblivious of others, can be disastrously limiting. The neglect of our plural identities in favour of one ‘principal’ identity can greatly impoverish our lives and practical reason.

In fact, we can have plural identities even with competing categories. One citizenship does, in an elementary sense, compete with another, in a person’s identity. For example, if an Indian citizen resident in Britain is unable to take British citizenship because she does not want to lose her Indian citizenship, she may still have quite a substantial loyalty to her British attachments and to other features of her British identity which no Indian court can outlaw. Similarly, an erstwhile Indian citizen who has given up that citizenship to become a UK citizen may still retain considerable loyalties to her Indian identity.

The plurality of competing as well as non-competing identities is not only not contradictory, it can be part and parcel of the self-conceptions of migrants and their families. For example, the tendency of British citizens of West Indian or South Asian origin to cheer their ‘home’ teams in test cricket has sometimes been seen as proof of disloyalty to Britain. This phenomenon has led to Lord Tebbit’s famous ‘cricket test’ (to wit, you cannot be accepted as English unless you support England in test matches). This view involves a remarkable denial of consistent pluralities that may be easily involved in a person’s self-conception as well as social behaviour. Which cricket team to cheer is a completely different issue from the demands of British – or any other – citizenship, and different also from a socially cohesive life in England. In fact, in so far as Tebbit’s ‘cricket test’ induces an exclusionary agenda, and imposes an unnecessary and irrelevant demand on

immigrants, it makes social integration that much more difficult.

Similarly, on the other side, criticism is sometimes made of people who take pride in traditional, and classically old, British or English culture, and it has even been suggested that such belief must be seen as proof of their non-acceptance of a multi-ethnic Britain. Why so? Surely there is no conflict whatsoever in (1) fully accepting that the contemporary British population is a multi-ethnic mixture, which is supportive of the liberties and civil rights of different groups, and (2) maintaining at the same time that English traditional culture is far superior to anything that the immigrants have – or could have – brought. There is, in fact, overwhelming evidence that the vast majority of the British people – of all different colours – do not believe in any cultural comparison as simple as that. But there is no reason whatever to assume that such a belief, were it to be entertained, would disqualify the person from being a good citizen of a multi-ethnic Britain. The multi-ethnicity of Britain cannot be an all-engulfing super-identity that must knock out all other identifications – and beliefs – in deference to this one cause.

A related issue has been the subject of a somewhat diverting discussion in the recent *Report* of the Commission on the Future of Multi-ethnic Britain, sponsored by the Runnymede Trust. The *Report*, to give credit where it is due, discusses many important issues that genuinely need consideration and attention. It is, thus, somewhat unfortunate that the Report gets distracted into the dead-end of a non-issue as to whether ‘Englishness’ or ‘Britishness’ has racial connotations. Britain has not, of course, been racially homogeneous in any strict sense for a long time, with waves of invasion and immigration over two millennia or more. But until recently the composition of the population was predominantly ‘white’ (a term that has come to be used for a mixed hue with varieties of ruddiness thrown in). This, of course, is a historical fact, as is the cultural

fact that this is a country the past history of which has been distinctive, and continues to be influential in the lives of the inhabitants. Even the tradition of political and social tolerance in this country has strong historical roots.

A historian of language may find it interesting enough to see how the use of the word ‘British’ or even ‘English’ is changing. And changing it certainly is, in all kinds of different ways. Indeed, it is worth noting, in fairness to Norman Tebbit, that his absurd ‘cricket test’, misguided as it is, does not demand a skin inspection, only a close scrutiny of the cheers that emanate from immigrants, which is very different from mooring Britishness or Englishness on racial origin alone. To lament the fact that the terms ‘British’ or ‘English’ were not historically pre-fashioned *ex ante* to take note of the future arrival of multi-ethnic immigrants would surely be an exercise in futility.

Similarly, on the other side, when J.B.S. Haldane, the great biologist and geneticist, chose to become an Indian citizen and remained so to his death in Calcutta in 1964, he did not demand that the term ‘Indian’ be dissociated from its historical associations, only that he too be counted in as an Indian, which of course he was. The Haldanes’ acquiring of Indian citizenship was not coupled with rejecting their British linkages (only of particular features of contemporary British politics), nor, on the other side, with any qualms about the historical associations of the term ‘Indian’. There is, in fact, no serious reason for caging oneself in a prison of limited identities, or volunteering to be caught in an imagined contradiction between the richness of the past and the freedom of the present.

Professor Sen is Master of Trinity College, Cambridge and Lamont Professor Emeritus at Harvard University. He won the 1998 Nobel Prize for Economics for his research into the fundamental problems of welfare economics