Sen, Amartya, ed. *Peace and Democratic Society*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2011. 164 pp. Paperback ISBN: 978-1-906924-39-3.

On FADS and Other Errors

The registration of doubt is the vital first step in the writings of Amartya Sen; it is a common thread that runs throughout his beautifully written and very probing texts. *Poverty and Famines*, *The Argumentative Indian*, *Identity and Violence* and some of his most recent work--, including Sen's introductory essay to *Peace and Democratic Society*--are testimonies to the importance of careful questioning. There is a profound need for evidence-based skepticism and disbelief.

Doubt for Sen can begin with the identification of a theory. In *Poverty and Famines*, the theory is FAD: "The most common approach to famines is to propose explanations in terms of food availability decline (FAD)."[1] On this view, famines occur because the total supply of food is not adequate to feed all of the people living in a region. There is a flood or drought or some other natural disaster that leads to the scarcity of food. The problem with this approach, however, is that it is empirically inaccurate. In all instances of famine Sen analyzes in the 20th century, the total supply of food *does not* decline in the regions suffering from famine.

To support this claim, Sen speaks to the massive famine that broke out in British-administered Bengal in 1943. Sen estimates that two to three million Bengalis died of famine and the diseases related to famine in this year.[2] However, food production in Bengal in 1943 was "thirteen percent *higher* than in 1941, and there was, of course, no famine in 1941."[3] Or, to cite another example: a famine struck Bangladesh in 1974. However, 1974 was "a year of greater food availability than in any other year between 1971 and 1976" in Bangladesh.[4] The starvation of persons in this country in 1974 cannot be traced back to an overall decline in food supply during this year. Similarly with the famine in Ethiopia in 1972: "There is … very little evidence of a dramatic decline of food availability in Ethiopia coinciding with the famine. Indeed, a modest increase in agricultural output for Ethiopia as a whole is recorded in by the National Bank of Ethiopia for the famine years *vis-à-vis* the preceding years."[5] Food availability decline does not explain these terrible disasters.[6]

Sen's introductory essay to *Peace and Democratic Society* is similar to his work on poverty and famine in that it deals with a matter—the eruption of violence in society—of very great urgency. As John Stuart Mill said, "the whole value of any good" depends on the security of our person.[7] However, Sen is as careful in his approach to violence as he is in his approach to famine. FAD is not the only example of a mistaken theory.

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[1]Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 57.
[2]Ibid., p. 215.
[3]Ibid., p. 52.
[4]Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), p. 165.
[5]Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 92.
[6] Sen's analysis of famines in Ireland (in the 1840s) and China (1958-1961) do draw on the reality of a "food availability decline." However, Sen thinks of these famines in terms of "slump famines" that also involve a "food countermovement" from economically distressed to economically more prosperous areas. See *Development as Freedom* p. 330, n9.
[7]John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), p. 54.

To start with, Sen believes purely economic explanations of individual violence are inadequate. The claim that poverty alone causes violence does not pass muster. To support this criticism, Sen compares rates of violence between deeply impoverished Kolkata and other major cities in democracies throughout the world. As Sen notes, "The average incidence of murder in the 35 cities of India is 2.7 per 100,000 people – 2.9 for Delhi. The rate is .3 in Kolkata." He goes on: "In 2005, Paris had a homicide rate of 2.3, London 2.4, New York of 5.0, Buenos Aires 6.4, Los Angeles 8.8, Mexico City of 17.0, Johannesburg 21.5, San Paolo 24.0, and Rio De Janeiro an astonishing 34.9." Kolkata may be "one of the poorest cities of the world."[8] But it is not the most violent.

The claim that inter-personal violence is caused by poverty alone does not work. The second theory of violence criticized by Sen is a "civilizational" approach to violence. In Sen's words, "The (civilizational) approach defines some postulated entities that are called 'civilizations' in primarily religious terms, and it goes on to contrast the 'Islamic world', the 'Judeo-Christian Western world,' the 'Buddhist world,' the 'Hindu world,' and so on. It is the intrinsic hostility among civilizations that make them prone, it is argued in this high theory, to clash with each other."[9]

In reflecting on the "civilizational" approach, Sen points out how difficult it is to identify such things as "civilizations." For instance, members of the nationalist Hindutva political movement or the influential writer Samuel Huntington might describe India as a "Hindu civilization." But such a characterization of India is grossly inaccurate. In terms of history, Sen draws attention to the "heterodoxy" of "Indian thoughts and beliefs from the earliest days."[10] As Sen notes, "Sanskrit not only has a bigger body of religious literature than exists in any other classical language, it also has a larger volume of agnostic and atheistic writings than in any other classical language."[11] There is no uniformity of religious doctrine here. Moving forward in time, Sen notes that "Buddhism was the dominant religion in India for well over a millennium" and that "Chinese scholars regularly described India as the Buddhist kingdom."[12] Akbar, the Muslim Indian emperor who reigned in the 16th century, offered a "powerful defense of toleration and of the need for the state to be equidistant from different religions."[13] The history of religious and non-religious doctrines and their relations in India is a complicated story.

The past of India cannot be defined in terms of a single unbroken tradition of religious Hinduism. The "civilizational" thesis, however, is not simply a matter of what Sen calls "foggy history." It also glosses over present realities. Sen points out that "India currently has many more Muslims (more than 140 million – larger than the entire British and French populations put together) than any other country in the world with the exception of Indonesia and, marginally, Pakistan, and that nearly every country in Huntington's definitions of 'the Islamic civilization'

[8]Amartya Sen, "Violence and Civil Society," *Peace and Democratic Society*, ed. Amartya Sen (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2011), p. 18.
[9]Ibid., p. 11.
[10] Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity* (New York: Picador, 2005), p. xii.
[11]Ibid., p. 23.
[12]Ibid., p. xii.
[13]Ibid., p. xiii.

has far fewer Muslims than India has."[14] Describing India as a "Hindu civilization" ignores an awful lot of people. In terms of contemporary politics, the democratically elected government in India in 2006 has "a Sikh prime minister (Manmohan Singh) and is headed by a Muslim president (Abdul Kalam), with its ruling party (Congress) being presided over by a woman from a Christian background (Sonia Gandhi)."[15] Sen asserts that Kolkata's very low homicide rate must be due in some part to its past as a "thoroughly mixed city."[16] India is "diversely diverse" and cannot be understood as a Hindu "monoculture."[17]

What, then, causes violence between individuals in democratic societies? Sen is very cautious in his response to this question: "I am afraid we do not know enough about the empirical relations to be confident" about the exact causes of violence that threaten "human security."[18] Instead Sen speaks of the need for interdisciplinary approaches to this very urgent problem: "The main thesis I would like to present here is that the economic, social, and cultural issues need serious efforts at integration."[19] The very hard work of thinking clearly about the causes of violence remains. And it is from this point of view that Sen hopes we read the report of the Commonwealth Commission on Respect and Understanding entitled "Civil Paths to Peace" which his essay introduces. The Commonwealth report does not definitively solve the

[14]Ibid., p. 54. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life estimates that in 2010, there were more than 177 million Muslims living in India (http://features.pewforum.org/muslim-population/).
[15]Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (New York: Norton , 2006), p. 167. On July 25, 2007, Pratibha Patil suceeded Kalam and became the first woman to serve as president of India.
[16]Amartya Sen, "Violence and Civil Society," *Peace and Democratic Society*, ed. Amartya Sen (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2011), p. 19.
[17] Sen's use of the word "monoculture"—as in his expression "plural monoculturalism"—is very revealing: in Sen's view, thinking of "cultures" as isolated from each other is always a mistake. Rather, exchanges between persons—"the freedom to exchange words, or goods, or gifts"—are basic to human life and are always ongoing. Reflecting on the exchanges between persons is far more revealing than the imaginary idea of eternally isolated cultures. See *Identity and Violence*, p. 156 ff. and *Development as Freedom*, p. 6.
[18]Ibid., p. 19.
[19]Ibid., p. 10.

question of "Why violence in democracy?" Nevertheless, the report does illustrate how an approach to violence in democracy can be fashioned without relying on dangerous over-simplifications. It offers a way forward without rushing to answers.

Sen's writings about poverty and famine have a very precise coda: "no famine has ever taken place in the history of the world in a functioning democracy."[20] The causes of violence in democratic societies, however, have not been fully grasped. As such, the argument in "Violence and Civil Society" does not build up towards a conclusion in the manner of Sen's earlier texts. But doubts honestly expressed are better than wrong answers confidently proclaimed. Sen's essay—and the report that it accompanies—is well worth the reading.

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[20]Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), p. 16.