

Inquiry

An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/sinq20>

Duties of social identity? Intersectional objections to Sen's identity politics

Alex Madva, Katherine Gasdaglis & Shannon Doberneck

To cite this article: Alex Madva, Katherine Gasdaglis & Shannon Doberneck (17 Oct 2023): Duties of social identity? Intersectional objections to Sen's identity politics, Inquiry, DOI: [10.1080/0020174X.2023.2270527](https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2023.2270527)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2023.2270527>



Published online: 17 Oct 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Duties of social identity? Intersectional objections to Sen's identity politics

Alex Madva ^a, Katherine Gasdaglis ^a and Shannon Doberneck^b

^aDepartment of Philosophy, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, CA, USA;

^bUnaffiliated

ABSTRACT

Amartya Sen argues that sectarian discord and violence are fueled by confusion about the nature of identity, including the pervasive tendency to see ourselves as members of singular social groups standing in opposition to other groups (e.g. Democrat vs. Republican, Muslim vs. Christian, etc.). Sen defends an alternative model of identity, according to which we all inevitably belong to a plurality of discrete identity groups (including ethnicities, classes, genders, races, religions, careers, hobbies, etc.) and are obligated to choose, in any given context, which among our multiple affiliations to prioritize. While Sen's model of discrete identity prioritization is a clear advance over single-factor accounts, it overlooks significant lessons about identity from over 150 years of scholarship by feminists of color. In ignoring the experiences of women of color, Sen's model falsely assumes that identities are in-principle separable for the purposes of practical deliberation; and, in *obligating* individuals to make such identity-based 'reasoned choices,' Sen's model forces those with multiply marginalized identities to choose from a set of externally defined identity options, none of which sufficiently captures their experiences.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 18 February 2023; Accepted 10 October 2023

KEYWORDS Social Identity; Amartya Sen; intersectionality; feminism

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' (Sen 2007, 16; see also 1999, 2005, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2014). Sen implores us to resist the tendency to cast others and ourselves as members of one and only one social group, pitted against other groups, whether 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 (Sen 2007, xii). He urges, first, that

CONTACT Alex Madva  alexmadva@gmail.com  Department of Philosophy, California State Polytechnic University, 3801 W. Temple Ave, Pomona, CA 91768, USA

© 2023 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

we recognize the plural nature of our social identities, noting that we inevitably belong to many groups, e.g. race, class, gender, nationality, religion, profession, political party, etc.; – and, second, that each of us take responsibility for making reasoned choices about which of our group affiliations to prioritize in a given context. In this way, Sen's goal is to acknowledge the importance of social identity and group belonging to a well-lived life, while guarding against reductive treatments of identity as 'destiny,' fully determinative of our social and political choices. He attempts to do justice to the strong bonds of social identity while leaving sufficient room for individual liberty.

Sen is right that reasoned choice is important to the ways individuals navigate their social identities, and his proposal is a clear advance over singular conceptions of identity. Nevertheless, his account faces both conceptual and normative-political challenges. First, Sen's 'pluralist' conception of social identity under-describes and thereby threatens to obscure the lived complexities, constraints, and opportunities faced by people with certain identities. Specifically, Sen's model assumes that identity categories are in-principle separable for the purposes of practical deliberation, but over 150 years of feminist scholarship, especially by feminists of color, show that the various dimensions of our social identities cannot always be coherently distinguished. Moreover, suggesting that they can be so distinguished compounds the injustices faced by multiply marginalized individuals, as if Sen were telling, e.g. Black feminists that they can (and must) choose between prioritizing their feminism and their Blackness. Sen in particular fails to appreciate the extent to which the very meanings of the ostensible options in these identity choices are themselves sites of political conflict, reasoning, creativity, and resistance. For example, what do 'Blackness' and 'feminism' *mean*, and who gets to decide what they mean, when someone is asked to 'prioritize' their Blackness over their feminism?

Second, Sen suggests that individuals are politically or morally *obligated* to make choices of this kind. In an effort to combat a kind of unthinking conformism to dominant voices or the status quo (Sen 1999, 19), Sen calls us to take responsibility for how we see ourselves and which of our affiliations we foreground and commit resources to promoting. While the spirit of Sen's model stresses political liberty (e.g. 2009a, 246–247) – the freedom to choose who we are and become – he also claims that we are rationally *required* to make these choices. Such a requirement, however, would force marginalized individuals to be complicit in choosing among externally defined identity options that

reinforce their own subordination. Sen's model thus ignores an important range of injustices related to identity and group affiliation, thereby replicating some of the injustices he aims to redress. In what follows, we give further exposition of Sen's theory (§1), show how the view faces theoretical and political challenges (§§2–3), and consider one natural reply Sen might make (§4). We interrogate the empirical evidence underlying Sen's theory (§5), and, in conclusion, gesture briefly toward more promising methods for understanding social identity (§6).

But, first, why focus on Sen in particular? After all, Sen's work joins a chorus of scholarship on social identity, rational agency, and identity politics that followed in the wake of September 11, 2001 and Samuel Huntington's reductive account of 'clashes' between 'civilizations' (Huntington 1996).¹ Some of this scholarship, we would argue, faces problems similar to Sen's, but we focus on his account for several reasons. First, Sen makes ambitious claims about the explanatory and practical value of his model, which has seen renewed attention for its potential to illuminate surges in political polarization and authoritarian-nationalist identity movements worldwide (Kaldor 2019). Specifically, Sen argues that mistaken and widely held theories of social identity are drivers of violence and polarization, and that a better theory will be key to peace and depolarization. Clarifying the missteps in Sen's approach could be important for appreciating the potential causes and remedies of these global trends.

Second, Sen's perspective is distinguished by its nuanced relationship to classical economics. He attempts to enrich simplistic models of rational choice with communitarian insights. We argue, however, that Sen fails to chart a genuine 'middle way' between economists' and communitarians' visions of constrained rational agency, and collapses into the problematic forms of individualism, decontextualized ahistoricism, and hostility to group identity that led him to depart from classical economics in the first place. Third, while Sen's work on topics including capabilities, constraints, public reason, and nonideal theory have been thoroughly examined by philosophers and theorists across numerous disciplines – and those familiar with this work will recognize points of contact with what we discuss here – his writings on social identity have received less critical scrutiny.²

¹Among work contemporaneous with Sen's, and as we will gesture toward in §6, we are most sympathetic with, and influenced by, Alcott (2006); but see also Afshar, Aitken, and Franks 2005; Appiah 2007; Barvosa 2008; Phillips 2009; Warnke 2008).

²Sen's *Identity and Violence* is cited over 5,550 times on Google Scholar but typically just in passing or sloganized form. We cite theorists who engage more carefully with his work on identity in what follows.

Fourth, and above all, we focus on Sen because the unmistakable similarity of his approach to the plurality of social identity with work by feminists of color brings the underlying differences between their approaches into sharpest relief, and thereby highlights what intersectional feminist traditions continue to have to teach social scientists, philosophers, and activists alike. Sen has described himself as a ‘feminist economist’ (Agarwal 2008, 157), recognized by the International Association for Feminist Economics. His work is both praised and critically engaged by feminist scholars, including Elizabeth Anderson and Bina Agarwal (Agarwal, Humphries, and Robeyns 2003), Edwina Barvosa (2008), and others. More specifically, Sen’s opposition to ‘single-minded’ and ‘additive’ (Sen 2005, 205) analyses of social categories echoes decades-old arguments made by feminists of color, even leading some to call his work ‘intersectional’ (Gasper 2020, 20). Nevertheless, we’ll argue that his model of the relationship between practical deliberation and social identity fails to appreciate several key insights from the intersectional tradition, evidently because Sen has (as far as we can tell) ignored this tradition entirely. Although Sen is right to emphasize, as feminists long have, the interplay of agency and constraint in understanding and reshaping social reality, he is wrong both about the nature of agency and about the nature of constraint when it comes to navigating social identity.

1. Sen’s account of social identity

Against those who downplay social identity altogether (such as advocates of political colorblindness), Sen notes the importance of social identity for giving us ‘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 (Sen 2007, 1, 2).

Sen therefore agrees that, ‘it would make little sense to treat identity as a general evil’ (2007, 4). Nevertheless, he believes our thinking about social identity lies in ‘conceptual disarray’ (Sen 2007, 165). We routinely overestimate the political and cultural differences between members of different groups and underestimate the extensive heterogeneity within groups (Sen 2007, 11). In particular, Sen bemoans ‘the illusion of singular identity’ (Sen 2007, 8), the tendency to assume that individuals are members of one and only one relevant social group, a group conceived as both

unchosen and determinative of their political priorities. Writing partly in response to the surge of Islamophobia in the aughts, Sen is especially concerned to combat both the exoticism of viewing ‘others’ solely in terms of religious affiliation and the racist and reductive histories modeled in terms of a ‘clash’ of ‘civilizations.’ He aims, therefore, to do justice to the personal and interpersonal value of social identity without ‘incarcerating people within the enclosure of a singular identity’ (Sen 2007, 15).

To these ends, Sen defends a *pluralist* account of social identity, which we dub ‘separable’ or ‘discrete 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 non-believer in an afterlife (Sen 2007, 19).

Sen’s list here roughly reflects leading social-scientific theories of identity. For example, building on Kay Deaux’s (1993) influential account, Isis Settles defines identities as ‘groups to which one belongs that are meaningful aspects of one’s self-concept’ (2006, 289). Identities in this sense refer to shared traits or group affiliations that constitute a facet of a person’s self-conception, disposing them to claim the identity as ‘representative’ of who and what they are (Smaldino 2019; Tajfel and Turner 1979).

In this passage, Sen elaborates the distinction between what he calls ‘discovered’ and ‘chosen’ identities (Sen 2007, 5). He argues that some identities are a matter of discovery, of finding out how the social world categorizes us. For instance, given current US laws around citizenship, infants born today in the United States are American before they are in a position to know it. By contrast, many social identities are, or at least can be, ‘chosen,’ such as being a Republican, vegetarian, teacher, or expatriate. Yet, Sen argues, while membership in discovered identity categories is unchosen, the role such membership plays in our lives, and the weight, if any, we assign to category membership are matters of choice.

According to Sen, we must all make context-specific choices about the ‘relative importance’ of our multiple identities, a decision process he refers to as ‘identity prioritization’ (Sen 2007, 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’ (Sen 2007, 24, 39). For example, an individual may be fourth-generation Lebanese-American, but not assign much importance to their Lebanese heritage, e.g. without learning much about the histories, politics, languages, cultures, or traditions of Lebanon.

Second, we have to determine ‘the *relative* importance of these different identities,’ a task which also requires ‘reasoning and choice’ (Sen 2007, 24, emphasis added). In one low-stakes example, Sen writes that ‘an Australian citizen of Indian origin would have to decide whether to root for Australia or for India in a test match between the two countries; he cannot, in any obvious sense, simply ‘discover’ the result of his own choice’ (2005, 351).³ Sen notes that the specific ways we weigh the relative importance of our identities as well as the difficulty of the decisions themselves are context-dependent. Thus, for a vegetarian French citizen living in the US, ‘the vegetarian identity may be more important when going to a dinner rather than to a Consulate, whereas the French citizenship may be more telling when going to a Consulate rather than attending a dinner’ (Sen 2005, 350; see also 2007, 25). And sometimes our identities

can compete for relevance, even in a given context. For example, in considering a problem of London transport, a person’s loyalties as a Londoner keen in improving the transport of her city may conflict with her convictions as a fiscal conservative keen on keeping public expenses severely under control (Sen 1999, 15).

For a nonfictional example of identity prioritization, M. Annette Jaimes cites one of the founders of Women of All Red Nations (WARN), Lorelai DeCora Means:

We are *American Indian* women, in that order. We are oppressed, first and foremost, as American Indians, as peoples colonized by the United States of America, *not* as women. As Indians, we can never forget that. Our survival, the survival of every one of us – man, woman and child – *as Indians* depends on it. Decolonization is the agenda, the whole agenda, and until it is accomplished, it is the *only* agenda that counts for American Indians.

... you start to get the idea maybe all this feminism business is just another extension of the same old racist, colonialist mentality (As cited, with original emphasis, in Jaimes 1992, 314, 332).

³We find this example phenomenologically implausible (*must* a person choose rather than discover their rooting preference?) and return to related concerns in §2.2.

Whatever one ultimately makes of these claims (which we reconsider in §2.2), DeCora Means and her colleagues are explicitly prioritizing their American Indian identity and decolonial political projects over gender and feminist political projects, as they understand them.

We find another example in so-called ‘class-reductionist’ readings of Marxism. Such readings, typically leveled in the context of critique, attribute to Marx the view that class identity should be prioritized over other identities, including gender and race, insofar as sexism and racism are ‘epiphenomena’ of or ‘reducible’ to class exploitation (cf. Wills 2018, 232). Because such views take class exploitation to be theoretically fundamental, they also typically call for the political prioritization of class solidarity, as opposed to gender or racial solidarity. Positions like this reflect the kind of identity prioritization Sen advocates.⁴ Sen himself seems to favor prioritizing class identity in at least some cases, writing that in West Bengal and especially Kolkata, efforts to prioritize ‘identities related to left-wing politics and class have had the effect of vastly weakening violence based on religious divisions and community contrasts’ (2008, 11).

Sen’s model therefore captures some of the lived complexities of identity experience, including its context dependence and fluidity. His 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* (or as he might say, *capability*), 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’ (Sen 2007, 5 see also 38). Each individual should be free to prioritize their group affiliations as they see fit. No one should be coerced or misled into thinking that mere membership in a certain social group determines their political allegiances and priorities.⁵ Sen is clearly right about this.

⁴See Wills (2018) for discussion of the shortcomings of class-reductionist readings of Marx. Wills (2018, 236, original emphasis) also draws a key distinction between class exploitation and ‘classism’: ‘Workers do experience ‘classism’ – oppression on the basis of their working-class identity. They experience this for example when their specifically class-marked ways of speaking, eating, and dressing are marginalized and treated as inherently inferior to the habits of elites. But this oppression is importantly analytically distinct from class *exploitation*, which is an economic relation in which the value of their labor is systematically extracted from them.’

⁵See also the putative ‘reasoning’ and ‘reification’ problems for identity politics in Alcott (2006, chap. 2).

More often, however, Sen characterizes identity prioritization as a matter of *personal responsibility*, an ‘exacting and extremely important’ obligation (Sen 2007, 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, that we are repeatedly called on to deliberate and decide how to weigh our various identities in any given situation (Sen 2007, xiii). For Sen, pervasive polarization reflects that far too many of us are shirking these responsibilities.

While we agree that individuals are responsible for making political choices about which social or political projects to pursue, in the next two sections, we explain how Sen’s model of identity prioritization mischaracterizes and obscures situations for individuals with certain identities.

2. Misleading identity

As critics have noted, Sen’s examples may elide important differences between types of identities. For example, while political party membership can sometimes be a life-constituting project and deeply held core identity, often it is not. The contingency and variability of the role this type of group membership may play in individuals’ self-conceptions arguably points to an in-principle difference between this kind of identity and ever-present ‘visible’ identities, like race, gender, and visible disability, through which the social world systematically sorts us into separate groups (Alcoff 2006, 6).⁶ While Sen acknowledges that not just any property, belief, or gerrymandered group-membership will be identity-constituting (Sen 2007, 26–28), he considers neither the potentially deep differences between kinds of core identity, nor, for that matter, any in-principle ways of distinguishing basic *beliefs* and *values* from identities.⁷ Inattention to these in-principle differences may lead to problems for

⁶Note that Sen’s contrast between ‘chosen’ and ‘discovered’ identities does not track the relevant distinction here. Sexuality, for example, can be a ‘discovered’ identity on Sen’s framework, but is not an essentially visible identity in Alcoff’s sense.

⁷For example, Appiah (2008, 481) argues that Sen ignores a key difference between identities that are merely descriptive (e.g., to be a theist, you simply have to believe in God) and identities that carry normative prescriptions (e.g., to truly count as a member of a certain group (religion, gender, etc.), you are expected to act according to a rich set of norms of ‘conduct and feeling’). For related criticisms of Warnke’s (and Appiah’s) accounts of social identity, see Alcoff (2012). See also Deaux (1993) and references therein regarding attempts to distinguish social identity from ‘personal identity,’ by which social scientists mean the self-defining traits and values that distinguish oneself as an individual from other individuals.

Sen's conception of practical deliberation,⁸ but we set these worries aside. Our concerns center on Sen's model for navigating our identities.

Sen motivates his project by identifying obvious inadequacies of a 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,⁹ rather than a full-blown theory that anyone earnestly defends.¹⁰ Even Huntington recognizes that individuals are members of multiple groups.¹¹ According to him, this multiplicity is a *problem* to be mitigated by cultivating shared, superordinate identities (e.g. just 'American' rather than 'Italian-American' or 'African-American,' and a member of the 'United States' rather than of 'Red States' or 'Blue States,' etc.). When Huntington and others focus on 'cultural differences' to explain broad trends of economic development and geopolitics to the exclusion of numerous other interrelated factors (Sen 2007, 106–107), they are not forgetting that these other factors exist. They are knowingly downplaying (or de-prioritizing) their explanatory value.

In fact, Sen cites no theorists, activists, or demagogues who explicitly defend the singular conception, so it is likely not his deepest concern. Elsewhere, Sen characterizes the problem as a certain kind of thinking (or messaging) to the effect that certain 'identities must have an intrinsic priority' over others (Sen 2007, 7), or that certain unchosen identities 'have automatic priority over other affiliations' (Sen 2007, 150) and are 'paramount in a predetermined way' (Sen 2007, 4). His real target, then, is 'rigid' or 'choiceless' prioritization, as when individuals are told to give 'automatic priority to inherited religion or tradition over reflection and choice' (Sen 2007, 160). And Sen is right that it is unjust to coerce or manipulate others into acting as if one affiliation 'must invariably dominate' over every other (Sen 2007, 7), just as it is confused to theorize that

⁸For example, eliding the distinction between identity and value may render practical deliberation inappropriately self-regarding. To return to one of Sen's examples, suppose I'm a proud Londoner who values the development of the city I love, as well as a fiscal conservative concerned to limit public spending. Should the decision to support city development be framed in terms of identity, about 'who I really am?' Or should it be framed in terms of the relative merits of the two options (the things themselves rather than the deliberator's identity)? This is not to imply that policy deliberation should *never* involve identity, e.g., individuals may have good identity-based reasons for supporting a community development plan.

⁹As Sen (2008, 14) himself considers, perhaps it is 'nothing other than an artificially fostered avowal ...'

¹⁰Sen claims that the singular model of identity is implied by certain communitarian ethical positions (Sen 2007, 32–36). We agree with Ranjoo Herr that few if any communitarians genuinely endorse such a view. In comments on an earlier version of this paper, Herr suggested that the real problem with Sen's account is that he slips into lazy criticisms of identity politics and communitarianism that straw-person his opponents.

¹¹For a thorough engagement with Huntington's work, see Barvosa (2008, chap. 1).

culture, religion, class, or any other category must always take priority in social explanation.

Nevertheless, and regardless of Sen's real target, his alternative model of separable identity pluralism fails to account for fundamental realities about, and experiences of, identity, including ongoing and politically significant debates about the meanings of identity categories, especially as these debates relate to those navigating multiple marginalized identities.

2.1. Intersectional identity experiences

Over a century and a half of feminist and intersectional scholarship cautions against assuming that identity categories and identity-based oppressions are separable and discrete. Consider this exchange between Beverly and Barbara Smith:

Beverly Smith: For purposes of analysis what we try to do is to break things down and try to separate and compare, but, in reality, the way women live their lives, those separations just don't work. Women don't live their lives like, 'Well this part is race, and this is class, and this part has to do with women's identities,' so it's confusing.

Barbara Smith: And Black women and women of color in particular don't do that ... We don't have to rank and separate out. What we have to do is define the nature of the whole, of all the systems impinging on us (Smith and Smith 2015, 114; see also Lorde 2020, 111).

The Smith sisters are responding here to the historical tendencies in social justice movements to compare and contrast different forms of oppression, as, for example, when Beauvoir (1989, 22) writes, 'there are deep similarities between the situation of woman and that of the Negro,' both of which, she claims, are very different from the situation of 'the Jew.' As scholars like Elizabeth Spelman (1988) explain, claims like these are difficult to parse unless we are thinking about the situations of Jewish and Black *men* being compared to that of white, non-Jewish women. Given that many women are Black and/or Jewish, and quite a few Black people are women, it *makes little sense* to *compare* the universal or general situation of women to Black people just as such. It must be that Beauvoir is thinking of white, culturally Christian women's situations as representative of all women's, and, accordingly, that prioritizing feminist political projects implicitly means advancing white Christian women's concerns. Speaking for all women while ignoring the experiences of women of color and women of different faiths and ethnicities reflects a

theoretical failure to notice the ways gender oppressions differ by race, religion, class, sexuality, and ability, among other categories.

Sen's emphasis on rational *prioritizing* treats the identity categories at play as discrete. This emphasis leads Sen to ignore the experiences – and, evidently, the scholarship – of theorists like the Smith sisters. The effect of this erasure is pronounced in some of Sen's remarks on 'feminist identity':

... A feminist activist could well consider what her commitments should be to address the special deprivation of women in general – not necessarily only those in her own country. When an Italian feminist is involved in a movement for more gender justice in Sudan, *she is acting not primarily as an Italian, but as a feminist* (Sen 1999, 29, emphasis added).¹²

Sen's intended point is that feminist identities can be transnational as well as local, and that feminists can work to combat gender injustice in countries other than their own. Yet he presupposes a problematic definition of what it means to be and act out of an Italian identity that is somehow at odds with a commitment to global justice. When the Italian feminist fights for gender justice in Sudan, she is, according to Sen, *not* prioritizing her Italian identity, but some broader 'global' feminist identity. Apparently, were she acting from the 'Italian part' of herself, she would behave differently, perhaps by engaging in political projects specific to Italy. The assumption is that there is something else it means to be Italian, or to be an Italian feminist, which has nothing to do with transnational feminism. Sen excludes the possibility of, for example, Italian feminists who see their Italian-ness as inescapably tied up in global politics, or, for that matter, the possibility of Sudanese-Italian feminists who advocate for Sudanese women by combatting racist policy in Italy (cf. Mputubwele 2020).¹³

2.2. The meanings of identities: hermeneutic challenges

One assumption of discrete identity pluralism is that there exists a preset list of options to which agents can choose to assign various weights.

¹²Sen (2009a, 142) offers a nearly identical example:

a feminist activist in America who wants to do something to remedy particular features of women's disadvantage in, say, Sudan would tend to draw on a sense of affinity that need not work through the sympathies of the American nation for the predicament of the Sudanese nation. Her identity as a fellow woman, or as a person (male or female) moved by feminist concerns, may be more important in a particular context than her citizenship ...

¹³For more on the difficulty of separating out identities, see, e.g., Lugones (2003) and Spelman (1988). For insightful empirical work on the contrast between identity prioritization and what social scientists call 'identity content' (i.e., an identity's meaning or definition), see, e.g., van Zomeren, Kutlaca, and Turner-Zwinkels (2018) and Mikołajczak, Becker, and Iyer (2022). See also §5–6.

Today, a person chooses to prioritize her Italian identity; tomorrow she prioritizes her feminist identity. Yet scholars and laypeople alike continue to dispute, explore, shift, and *reclaim* the meanings of these identities. Moreover, the assumption of an identity 'menu' treats the meanings of identity categories as antecedently determined (by someone). The question then arises, given the complexities of identity experiences, whose perspectives are reflected in the options themselves? Are the meanings on the menu inclusive and representative, or exclusionary and hegemonic?

Returning to Sen's example, the very idea that someone is not prioritizing their Italian-ness when they're acting as a feminist cedes determination of the *meaning of being Italian* to the privileged or to ideologues who then get to define 'the traditional Italian way of life' as inherently patriarchal or parochial. Yet, if we were instead to center the experiences of feminist Italians in our interpretation of Italian identity (§6) and come to appreciate their role in Italy's political history, we would discover that Italian feminists would be in no respects *wrong* in interpreting their Italian-ness as part and parcel of their feminism. On the contrary, the patriarchal interpretation of Italian identity seems willfully ignorant of its own history.

In this vein, consider Deborah King's claim, inspired by Fannie Lou Hamer, that the 'necessity of addressing all oppressions is one of the hallmarks of black feminist thought' (King 1988, 43). Similarly, the 2016 platform of the Movement for Black Lives understands the project of fighting for Black lives in broad and inclusive political terms:

We believe in elevating the experiences and leadership of the most marginalized Black people, including but not limited to those who are women, queer, trans, femmes, gender nonconforming, Muslim, formerly and currently incarcerated, cash poor and working class, differently-abled, undocumented, and immigrant (Movement for Black Lives 2016).

On this view, *what it means* to prioritize Black identity *just is* to prioritize multiply marginalized members of the Black community, in ways that reveal how liberatory political projects can be interrelated rather than in competition.

A practical deliberation model of identity like Sen's presupposes that the deliberator must first settle on working definitions of their identities before choosing among them. Moreover, these working definitions must be sufficiently conceptually distinct in ways transparent to the deliberator's practical reflection, such that it makes sense to choose between

them. Yet given that what it means to be Italian, feminist, or an Italian feminist are themselves topics of ongoing collective inquiry and debate, as well as sites of creativity and open-ended personal reflection, we cannot assume that the task of prioritizing among them will always be straightforward, or even coherent. We refer to the ongoing personal and political difficulties of arriving at an interpretation of an identity as ‘hermeneutic’ challenges.¹⁴

Nowhere is Sen’s confusion about the practical and theoretical implications of these hermeneutic challenges more evident than in his discussion of the popular and scholarly debates of the early aughts surrounding the question what it means to be a ‘true Muslim’ (Sen 2007, 77). While Sen raises important objections to the disproportionate attention paid to debates over how to define the ‘true Muslim’ in that historically specific, reactionary moment, he simultaneously, and arguably inconsistently, advances his own definition.¹⁵ Sen writes:

It is possible for one Muslim to take an intolerant view and another to be very tolerant of heterodoxy without either of them ceasing to be a Muslim for that reason. This is not only because the idea of *ijtihad*, or religious interpretation, allows considerable latitude within Islam itself, but also because an individual Muslim has much freedom to determine what other values and priorities he or she would choose without compromising a basic Islamic faith (Sen 2007, 65).

On this basis, Sen opposes extremists who define Islam in terms of a ‘strongly confrontational militancy,’ but also those who claim that ‘a “true Muslim” must be a tolerant individual,’ as when former British Prime Minister Tony Blair repeatedly appealed to the ‘the moderate and

¹⁴An important question is whether there are correctness, authenticity, or fittingness conditions on some identities. Do some interpretations veridically track (among other things) the ongoing historical, political, and material situatedness of the identity better than other interpretations? Cf. the distinction between operative, manifest, and target concepts in Haslanger (2012). For the purposes of this paper, we remain agnostic about these questions. However, our intuition is that, for some identities, it is possible for people to interpret their identities wrongly. For example, Black feminists have argued that the interpretations of Blackness and womanhood offered by some antiracist men and feminist white women are not just politically exclusionary but also false and misleading.

Given how identities shift and emerge over time, new correctness conditions for a given identity may be brought into existence through social and material processes, including historical shifts in laws and institutions, as well as through collective and individual processes of identity exploration and experimentation (§6). New identities can be forged, and existing identities can change, through collective, dynamic, and creative processes (e.g., Anzaldúa 2012; Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015). Which if any identities have correctness conditions, how to determine them, and how they might change, are questions beyond this paper’s scope. One option for balancing the concerns to respect creative agency and to track social reality accurately might be to grant that there is a plurality of different ‘fitting’ interpretations but some incorrect ones (e.g., Alcoff 2006; Madva 2019). Consider white privilege. Although experiences of whiteness are heterogeneous, we find it plausible that at least some white people who deny that they benefit from white privilege are mistaken about their own identity. Thanks to Gabrielle Johnson and an anonymous referee for incisive discussion here.

¹⁵See also Warnke’s (2008) ‘identity minimalism.’

true voice of Islam' (Sen 2007, 76–77). Instead, Sen argues (from the outside) that there is a more minimal core or 'basic' Islamic faith that the two interpretations – and presumably all Muslims – share (Sen 2007, 82). The suggestion seems to be that individual Muslims will be in a better position to prioritize their other identities (perhaps their globalism or humanism, or perhaps their careers or hobbies) and pursue different projects once they come to see their religious identities are not in conflict with their other identities. His further hope is that prioritizing other identities will lead to the de-escalation of conflict.

While Sen's minimalist definition is one possible interpretation, it is undeniable that, as Anthony Appiah notes (2008, 485), many Muslims interpret the non-negotiable 'core' of their religious identity differently. For many Muslims, it is part of how they understand their Muslim identity that they are committed to tolerance or intolerance of heterodoxy, such that their religious identity is not cleanly separable from their stance toward tolerance. That is, their stance toward tolerance is not just consistent with their identity; it is taken to be internal to the identity. Similarly, some Christians may take tolerance toward LGBTQAI+ individuals to be permitted or even required by their faith, while others take it to be prohibited. Theists may react to perceived prohibitions against tolerance in various ways. For example, some may take these prohibitions as reasons to give up their religious identity and leave their community, whether by abandoning their faith or seeking out more tolerant denominations.¹⁶ Sen certainly recognizes all of this. Yet he fails to appreciate that difficult hermeneutic and ethical challenges like these cannot be sidestepped or resolved by we nonbelievers (the current authors and Sen included) stipulating from the outside that there is an essential 'core' to Christianity, such that Christians (straight and queer alike) are free to prioritize supporting or opposing LGBTQAI+ rights without thereby compromising their faith-based identity.

Moreover, once the meaning of a relevant identity is settled, Sen's ostensibly key final step of prioritizing among identities becomes, in many cases, superfluous. Whenever individuals' conceptions of their identities already encode a set of priorities and action-guiding principles related to their other identities, these conceptions thereby preclude any non-trivial role for further reasoned choice of the kind that Sen hopes will deliver us from polarization and intergroup violence. (Sen's

¹⁶For more on the well-established dynamics of navigating cognitive dissonance, see Gawronski and Strack (2012).

implicit recognition of this leads him to interpret Islam in the thinnest terms possible.) A religious believer who interprets their faith as requiring tolerance toward sexual minorities will not have to decide whether to prioritize their religion over their opposition to heterosexism, because the former prescribes the latter. In such cases, *a great deal of the practical, action-guiding, work is done by determining what the identity means*. In these cases, Sen's primary theoretical contribution – choice among identity categories – becomes superfluous.

The hermeneutic challenges facing a model like Sen's are not merely practical; they are also genuinely epistemic. The issue facing Sen's account is not simply that individual agents must first subjectively 'figure out' some working meaning for their identity categories as a preamble to prioritizing between them. Rather the deeper issue is that individuals can be confused about what their identities are, a confusion which in turn distorts their priorities and decisions. Sen certainly recognizes that individuals can be misled about the meanings of their identities – this is a premise of his book. Yet, and this is the fundamental mystery in his work on identity, given that people can so often be misled, how exactly is more individual reasoning that prioritizes among confused identity conceptions supposed to help?

A different kind of response to apparent tensions between identities is available. A wide array of intersectional feminists embrace the practical and hermeneutic project of *integrating* their social identities, rather than prioritizing among them. Empirical research supports this perspective. For example, Black women who report *being Black* as important to their identity *also* report that *being a woman* and *being a Black-woman* are important to them – 'prioritizing' one of these identities is *positively rather than negatively* correlated with prioritizing the others (Settles 2006).

Similarly, while Annette Jaimes and Lorelai DeCora Means assert the priority of their indigenous identity *over* their feminism (as cited in §1), others argue that the oppression of indigenous communities is inextricably tied to the oppression of women and those outside the gender binary:

Prior to colonization, gender roles within many tribes were egalitarian, and many indigenous cultures were matrifocal ... Colonizers stripped indigenous women and gender nonconforming peoples of power and instituted a patriarchal system that continues to have significant impacts today ...

Today, indigenous women, men, and LGBTIQ persons are striving to reconstruct positive gender roles and identities that will help heal the wounds of

colonization and restore health to their communities (Vinyeta, Whyte, and Lynn 2015, 5, 11).

Thus, on this approach, the decolonial project *is*, when properly understood, an anti-patriarchal project, such that there is little sense to be made of prioritizing one over the other. In much the same way, theorists including Vanessa Wills (2018) and Ian Haney-López (2019) argue that the struggle against class exploitation and socioeconomic inequality is and must be integrated with the struggles against racism and sexism.

3. The politics of prioritization

The problems with Sen's account are not merely theoretical. Even if it were typically straightforward how to prioritize among identities, being *required* to prioritize could still be profoundly unjust. Kimberlé Crenshaw describes some of the many ways in which women of color are unfairly expected to choose between promoting gender and race equality, explaining that they are often:

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 (Crenshaw 1991, 1252).

Crenshaw describes the ways feminist and antiracist political movements compound the difficulties faced by women of color by framing Blackness and womanhood as an 'either/or proposition' (Crenshaw 1991, 1242; see also hooks 1994, 127). Where Sen seeks to demonstrate the 'power in *competing* identities' (2007, 4 emphasis added), feminists of color continue to throw light on the many forms of oppression they face precisely when their race and gender are presented to them as competing and mutually exclusive.

For one significant example, consider Crenshaw's discussion of *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors*, a case in which a group of Black women sued GM for employment discrimination (Crenshaw 1989, 1252). The company had hired no Black women prior to 1964 and subsequently laid off all the Black women hired after 1970 due to a recession. But the district court argued that Black women are not 'a special class to be protected from discrimination,' and so had to demonstrate *either* race discrimination *or* sex discrimination (*DeGraffenreid v. General Motors Assembly Div., Etc.* 1976, 413:143). Then, in a summary judgment in favor of GM, the court noted that GM had hired white women, and so

had not committed sex discrimination, and had hired Black men, and so had not committed race discrimination. In this case, the plaintiffs were legally and unjustly required to deny the distinctiveness of the discrimination they faced and choose between the fight against racism and the fight against sexism. Requiring choice in such cases is not merely conceptually confused; it is profoundly unjust.

4. How might Sen reply?

One *prima facie* possibility for salvaging Sen's choice-based model is adding more (intersectional) options to the identity menu. In response to *DeGraffenreid*, Sen might argue that the relevant injustice is not that plaintiffs who claim discrimination are required to choose which type of discrimination claim to pursue. The injustice is that intersectional discrimination is *a priori* excluded from the option set. In all of Sen's writings on this topic, we find only one offhand gesture in this direction, about having 'choices over alternative identities or combinations of identities' (2007, 38).¹⁷ Yet this direction is explicitly pursued by Mozaffar Qizilbash in defense of Sen. Qizilbash cites Afshar, Aitken, and Franks' analysis of the way, after 9/11, both militant Muslim organizations and non-Muslim British politicians pressured British Muslims to choose between faith and nationality (Qizilbash 2014; citing Afshar, Aitken, and Franks 2005). They were told they could be either British or Muslim but not both. As Qizilbash explains:

... The choice is presented in such a way that the two options appear mutually incompatible ... Some Muslim groups accept the terms of the debate by insisting that their members give up their British identity and become 'just Muslims' ... This would suggest that the terms of the debate themselves can restrict choice. And the terms of the debate are rarely a matter of choice ... Yet ... other Muslims attempt in this context to find ways of being 'both Muslim and British' ... So we can reject the ways in which the terms of the debate are presented by, and the underlying perceptions of, some of the participants. That, too, can be a matter of reasoned choice. This all suggests that even if one has limited influence on the social context in which one makes choices, *choice about identity extends to the very description of one's social affiliation* (Qizilbash 2014, 18, emphasis added).

¹⁷So far as we can tell, Sen's discussions of particular cases are *without exception* critical of efforts to prioritize thick, intersectional, or combinatory identities. He is especially critical of combinations involving race, ethnicity, or religion, which he consistently portrays as 'sectarian' relative to various broader, superordinate identities, such as citizenship, class, or a 'global sense of belonging' (Sen 2007, 182; see also 2007, 14, 167; 2008, 11; 2009a, 142).

Qizilbash describes how individuals and groups can reject restrictive debate terms and explore creative, noncompeting ways of understanding their multiple identities. Qizilbash's account is similar in spirit to work by many feminists of color before him. Thus Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa write, 'we refuse to make a choice between our cultural identity and sexual identity, between our race and our femaleness. We are not turning our backs on our people nor on our selves' (Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015, 102). Moraga continues, 'what is my responsibility to my roots – both white and brown, Spanish-speaking and English? I am a woman with a foot in both worlds; and I refuse the split' (Moraga 2015, 29).

Yet despite its similarities to the intersectional approach that we ultimately endorse (§6), Qizilbash's attempt to salvage Sen's choice-based model fails. First, his suggestion that we simply add new identities to the menu faces many of the same conceptual and normative difficulties we have enumerated. Normatively speaking, calling on people to choose between their British identity, their Muslim identity, or their British Muslim identity may still well be coercive and wrong. Conceptually speaking, what does it actually *mean* to choose, say, one's British Muslim identity over one's Muslim identity, or one's womanhood over one's Black-womanhood? Someone who finds ways to be both British and Muslim has already defined *what it means to be Muslim* such that there is either no sense or no use to be made of choosing whether to prioritize their combinatory identity or a single-factor identity. In this case, the main contribution of Sen's model – the power to choose between competing identities – again becomes at best superfluous, or, at worst, incoherent. And once again, to the extent that we *can* make sense of such choices, it is likely that we are ceding the job of defining these identities to those in (relative) power.

Second, consider a situation in which the meanings of the identity options have not yet been settled. Qizilbash can accept that, as we argued in §2.2, sometimes all the work gets done in defining the relevant identities. On his reconstruction, Sen's model of reasoned choice also operates at this higher-order level, wherein *individuals make reasoned choices about how to define their identities*. Indeed, his British Muslim example stands alongside many others where individuals and groups reason about how to interpret their identities. Yet Qizilbash fails to explain how rejecting externally imposed definitions of identities is best modeled as a matter of rational choice of the kind Sen describes. The processes by which people arrive at new, apt, and livable redefinitions are

varied and complex. According to the intersectional tradition, as we discuss below, these processes often involve a mixture of creativity, discovery, and community building. Qizilbash says nothing about how to model such varied processes as choices.

We should also remember that Sen and Qizilbash are offering a *model* of social identity. Like all models, it includes and highlights some ostensible aspects of the phenomenon while omitting and occluding others (see also Riddle 2019, 55). The real theoretical question, then, is not whether this model can be used post hoc to ‘accommodate’ intersectional examples, but whether the model advances our understanding of these empirical realities – when the conceptual disarray surrounding identity is most acute. Even if the model can be adapted such that objections to identity choice are still described, at a higher-order level, as choices, there’d remain a further question whether thinking of ourselves as *merely* choosing to prioritize identities is illuminating, or *does useful theoretical work*.

Thus, it is plausible that people who (to use Qizilbash’s revealing word choice) *find ways* to be both British and Muslim are engaging in inquiry to *discover* their identity and priorities at least as much as *practical* deliberation to decide what their priorities should be. When someone ‘refuses to choose’ between being British and Muslim, or between being feminist and antiracist, they are exercising their agency, presumably partly on the basis of reasons and reasoning. But using the idiom of choice to characterize this refusal may be inappropriate. Communities who find ways of interpreting their British and Muslim identities as compatible (or even as mutually informing) *may* but *need not* think of what they’re up to as simply *deciding* to see Islam as consistent with British citizenship and culture. Instead, they might understand themselves as trying to interpret Islam, the Quran, Hadith, and other relevant texts accurately, trying to track the truth about what it means to be who they are (Similarly, while some Muslims and non-Muslims alike argue that Islam is inherently patriarchal, feminist scholars point out that across ‘the world politicised Islamist women have been reading the Qur’an and holy texts; offering their own interpretations of their Islamic rights, and writing about and fighting for these rights’ (Afshar, Aitken, and Franks 2005, 269).) Such projects – of ‘finding ways to be both’ – might involve a mixture of inquiry, hermeneutical effort, decision, creativity, and community building. Alternatively, they might understand themselves as constructing their identities anew, or as *experimenting*, in social contexts, with different identity interpretations and then discovering how well a given interpretation

matches with their experience and enables their agency.¹⁸ This kind of identity experimentation (§6) suggests a more complex picture of the relationship between choice and discovery than Sen's model can illuminate.

5. Sen's use of empirical evidence and the risk of condescension

Sen speculates that the failure to appreciate separable identity pluralism is a major driver of violence and sectarianism. His perspective is grounded, in part, in formative experiences from his own life. For example:

From my own childhood memory of Hindu-Muslim riots in the 1940s, linked with the politics of partition, I recollect the speed with which the broad human beings of January were suddenly transformed into the ruthless Hindus and fierce Muslims of July. Hundreds of thousands perished at the hands of people who, led by the commanders of carnage, killed others on behalf of their 'own people.' Violence is fomented by the imposition of singular and belligerent identities on gullible people, championed by proficient artisans of terror (Sen 2007, 2).

While Sen's personal experiences represent valuable sources of information for understanding these riots and perhaps other instances of sectarian violence, we believe more evidence (whether social scientific or historical) is required to support his core hypotheses. However, so far as we can tell, Sen cites no social-scientific evidence about the effects of the singular (or plural) conception of identity on social events nor concrete examples of theorists or organizations that explicitly endorse the singular model.¹⁹ Moreover, by his own lights, the fact that we are all members of multiple groups is an 'extremely ordinary and elementary recognition' (Sen 2007, 45). This primes the question who exactly is confused about it.

¹⁸Consider also the typically pernicious effects of construing LGBTQAI+ identities, and sexual identities in general, primarily as a matter of *choice* with little room for *experimentation and discovery*. For a nuanced analysis of the role of choice, interpretation, and discovery in sexual identity, see, e.g., Wilkerson (2009).

¹⁹Even with respect to the partition of Indian and Pakistan, for example, Parul Sehgal (2022) makes a compelling case that the eruption of violence is not best understood in terms of a single-factor opposition between Hindus and Muslims. He suggests it must also be understood as intersecting with gender and sexuality, for it involved pervasive inter-religious and intra-religious 'sexual terrorism.'

Although explicit endorsements of the singular model are hard to find, one can, by contrast, find many cases that plausibly involve the explicit endorsement of *rigid prioritization*, but these examples tend to strike us as the result of *reasoned* choices or efforts at rational persuasion, as in Jaimes and Means' call to prioritize their American Indian identity over their gender, or calls to prioritize class over race (§1), and the cases we discuss in what follows.

In lieu of robust, wide-ranging historical evidence, survey data, etc., Sen's model at times seems to be grounded on the assumption that the masses – which is to say, *the people* – are unthinking conformists. Notice how the passage cited above concludes: 'Violence is fomented by the imposition of singular and belligerent identities on *gullible people*, championed by proficient artisans of terror' (Sen 2007, 2, emphasis added). He elsewhere refers to the 'foot soldiers' engaging in 'elementary herd behavior,' overwhelmed by an 'illusion' that 'eclipsed [their] freedom to think' (Sen 2007, 8, 10, 174). He alludes vaguely to 'an abdication of responsibility' for making rational choices about one's identity without naming real-world abdicators (Sen 1999, 21). The implication seems to be that participants in sectarian conflicts could not have chosen to commit violent acts on the basis of reasoned choice about their priorities. There is little, if any, room for reasoned violence on Sen's model – even when violence may be a necessary act of resistance. While Sen wonders how the singular conception could be 'so successful' given its 'extraordinary naïveté' (Sen 2007, 175), he might instead consider the possibility that this extraordinarily naïve view is not so pervasive, let alone action-guiding, after all.

The only historical phenomena Sen cites are instances of apparently 'sudden carnage' (Sen 2007, 171), when mass violence erupts from what seemed (perhaps from the outside, and perhaps to some insiders more than others) like relative peace, as in the Rwandan Civil War, the Yugoslav Wars, and the partition of India and Pakistan. While Sen's moving depictions of these periods of mass violence highlight the urgency of trying to better understand the causal chains igniting them, we question how much the singular conception is to blame, and, accordingly, how much separable identity pluralism would help. Sen seems to think that in such instances, if people could just pause to consider that they and their apparent enemies all occupy a plurality of social groups, violence could be averted. Yet, as Anthony Appiah writes of such cases:

What would have helped wasn't a better understanding of their identities, but rapid intervention to prop up the ailing economy and sustain the basic institutions that guarantee security. They were victims not of mistaken theories of identity but of a situation in which morally misguided behavior was evoked from people who had more or less the same theories of identity as everyone else (Appiah 2008, 488).

Although there is little doubt that demagogues exploit myriad identity-based tactics, including appeals to identity prioritization, to spur on

extremism, Sen does not provide clear evidence that the singular conception or unthinking, rigid prioritization played significant causal roles in these events.

The preponderance of available evidence paints a different picture. Individuals are typically driven toward problematic forms of identity-based radicalization not through sudden, unthinking, and choiceless herd behavior but through *highly personal and narratively structured quests for significance*, i.e. to find community, belonging, and purpose by taking part in a larger movement that builds an impactful legacy (Kruglanski, Bélanger, and Gunaratna 2019). This quest for significance is imbued with reasoned choice and reflective agency. Many individuals are driven to extremism through the search for meaning and narrative purpose in their lives, perhaps trying to understand why their lives haven't gone the way they'd hoped – and pursuing elaborate conspiracy theories about who should be blamed for their unmet expectations. Of course, to say that the quest for significance is replete with reasoned choice is not to say that the choices are *well-reasoned*, but to illustrate that the processes culminating in rigid identity prioritization are paradigmatically far more psychologically complex, reflective, temporally extended, and embedded in broader structures of social change and power relations than Sen appreciates.²⁰ To the extent that the problem is that people are reasoning poorly, or struggling with the nihilism of contemporary life, or embedded in epistemically vicious social networks and informational ecosystems that make their false beliefs and misguided political choices seem reasonable, then calling for more reasoned choice simply misses the point.

As little evidence suggests that the failure to choose is among the key drivers of polarization, there is little basis to predict that making identity choices more salient will be beneficial. In this vein, consider historical examples of people who *should* have seen some of their identities as rigidly prioritized over others, but did not. Leading up to the American Civil War, those Southern Americans who recognized that slavery was evil should have accepted that their American identity and allegiance to the Union Army superseded, e.g. their state-based or Confederate identities. Yet many made clear-eyed, reasoned choices to, as Sen would have

²⁰We do not claim that all violent political acts constitute 'extremism.' Some are justified acts of resistance to oppression. Our point is only that individuals are often recruited to groups espousing rigid prioritization through reasoned, narrative processes (rather than being swept up in sudden, mindless carnage).

to say, prioritize wrongly.²¹ The power of reasoned choice to deliver us from identity confusion and violence is only as good as the *reasoning* involved. As Agnes Tam has argued, ‘The historical record suggests that moral reasoning, far from preventing phenomena such as the Holocaust, racism, and human chauvinism, has actively rationalized them’ (2020, 73). And this is to say nothing of the possible roles for moral perception or judgment in the soundness of moral reasoning (Hepburn and Murdoch 1956). There is no guarantee that simply stressing more explicit rational choice will issue in normatively or rationally appropriate actions.

6. Concluding remarks: towards alternative identity models

We submit that choice does and should play a more circumscribed role in social identity processes, though we recognize that individuals sometimes do (or must) juggle or codeswitch between identities. In this vein, certain choice-based frameworks can be useful for, e.g. developing formal and empirically informed models of identity processes (e.g. Gries, Müller, and Jost 2022).²²

Yet such models can offer more sophisticated analyses than Sen’s of the relations between ‘chosen’ and ‘discovered’ identities, for example, by modeling *identity experimentation* in terms of *trial and error*. An individual can (choose to) try on a certain interpretation of a social identity, among those afforded to them by prevailing power structures and contextually relevant conceptual schemes, and then discover how well it fits. By way of illustration, imagine a middle-school student who tries sitting at different lunch tables with different cliques to see where they are welcomed (or excluded) and where they feel like they belong, or an undergraduate who ‘tries on’ different majors before settling on one that ‘fits.’ This exploratory process might, in the best case, lead to powerful moments of self-recognition where individuals find themselves at home in their social milieu, or they might find themselves excluded or uneasy in all the available schemas. Those who come to discover, or believe, that they fit in nowhere might – much the way that Gloria Anzaldúa (2012) seeks to articulate a ‘new mestiza consciousness’ – engage in an act of creative resistance, build new communities with others, and

²¹See, e.g., John S. Mosby’s (1907) letter to Samuel Chapman. Alternatively, perhaps Southerners like Mosby (assuming we can take their subsequent disavowals of slavery at face value) should have bracketed their group-affiliative concerns altogether and simply done what was required by justice. See note 8.

²²See also the comments and replies published alongside Gries and colleagues’ target article.

open social spaces for new identity possibilities. Even upon settling in with a given group, the student, through their agency, may simultaneously *transform* and *be transformed* by it.

Sen's idiom of choice from a preset menu of identity options captures only a subset of the relevant cases, or moments, of, what might be better called, *identity articulation*. Identity articulation is the ongoing process of continually discovering and creating ourselves as we navigate the social and material world. While a full theory of identity articulation lies beyond our current scope, we contend that any such theory must meet certain methodological and theoretical desiderata.

Methodologically speaking, any theory of identity articulation must be, first and foremost, intersectional. A full accounting of intersectional methodology is a large task (see, e.g. the arguments and additional references in Collins 2015; Crenshaw 1991; Curtin, Stewart, and Cole 2015; Gasdaglis and Madva 2020; Hancock 2016). One key feature of this methodology is a commitment to inquiring further into relations of difference within groups and relations of similarity across groups. On an intersectional approach, categories are internally diverse, and conceptions of specific identities evolve over time.

Second, the methodology must center marginalized experiences. We believe the limitations in Sen's theory in part reflect limitations in his bibliography.²³ Engagement with the scholarship of women and nonbinary people of color and members of other marginalized groups is one key strategy for resisting broader patterns of epistemic marginalization. Hence, a theory of identity articulation must be vigilant in continuously centering and recentering marginalized experiences and scholarship (e.g. Alexander-Floyd 2012; Garry 2011; Hancock 2016; Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015).

Third, identity theorizing must be an ongoing and largely empirical endeavor (e.g. Deaux 1993; Eskelinen et al. 2022; Flores 2022; Haslanger 2012; Mallon 2016; Mikołajczak, Becker, and Iyer 2022; Settles 2006; Smaldino 2019; Tajfel and Turner 1979; van Zomeren, Kutlaca, and Turner-Zwinkels 2018). The contrast here is with aprioristic approaches, which often devolve into defining identities from the armchair and which remain significant sources of the marginalization the first and second methodological desiderata are meant to combat.

²³A referee for *Inquiry* suggested that such remarks about Sen are ad hominem. They are not. They are reports of our failure to find any bibliographic evidence that Sen cites or otherwise engages with intersectional scholarship.

When we are intersectional in our empirical endeavors and center the experiences of marginalized groups, including women of color, we believe a correct theory of identity articulation will find that (a) processes of identity articulation involve a variety of hermeneutical skills, including ongoing interpretation, creativity, experimentation, as well as reasoned choice (e.g. Anzaldúa 2012). These skills are (b) cultivated and exercised in relation to social, relational, and material contexts (e.g. Riddle 2019). These contexts will include a plurality of social structures, including institutions, community norms, practices, expectations, policies, laws, the layout of physical spaces, including, e.g. built structures and city plans, artifacts, and patterns of distribution of material and social resources (e.g. Alcoff 2006; Reed-Sandoval 2020). Moreover, (c) the cultivation and exercise of these skills in the process of identity articulation are simultaneously individual and collective (e.g. Madva 2019; Madva, Kelly, and Brownstein 2023). Identities are articulated by individuals in community with others.

As these desiderata suggest, identity articulation involves dynamic social processes. It can be reasoned and agentive while also being interpretive, creative, and experimental. Our understanding of these dynamic processes of identity articulation – including the interplays between agency and constraint, and experiment and discovery – is informed by numerous scholars and artists who Sen ignores, including W.E.B. Du Bois (1987), Frantz Fanon (2008), Audre Lorde (2020), Gloria Anzaldúa (2012), Toni Morrison (2007; 2019), and Linda Martín Alcoff (2006). Despite our many criticisms of discrete identity pluralism, we believe that attention to these writings bears out what Sen calls his ‘more general point,’ namely that, ‘an understanding of [the] multiplicity of our identities can be a huge force in combating the instigation’ of identity-based injustices, polarization, and the breakdowns of democracy (2008, 11).

Acknowledgments

This paper has benefited greatly from audiences at the Mind, Language, and Social Change Conference in Knoll Farm, VT in August 2021, especially from Gabbrielle Johnson, Kate Ritchie, Umrao Sethi, Rima Basu, Jessica Moss, Michael Brownstein, Daniel Kelly, Ellen Fridland, Daniel Harris, Jonathan Phillips, and Peter Epstein; at the Philosophy of Social Science Roundtable in Vancouver in May 2017, especially from Fiona Jenkins, Georgie Warnke, and Derick Hughes; and at the Pacific Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association in April 2015, where Ranjoo Herr provided extremely helpful and incisive commentary.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Alex Madva  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8222-5937>

Katherine Gasdaglis  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7089-755X>

References

- Afshar, Haleh, Rob Aitken, and Myfanwy Franks. 2005. "Feminisms, Islamophobia and Identities." *Political Studies* 53 (2): 262–283. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2005.00528.x>.
- Agarwal, Bina. 2008. "Chapter 9. Engaging With Sen on Gender Relations." In *Arguments for a Better World: Essays in Honor of Amartya Sen: Volume II: Society, Institutions, and Development*, edited by Kaushik Basu and Ravi Kanbur, 157–178. 1st ed. Vol. 1. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199239979.003.0010>.
- Agarwal, Bina, Jane Humphries, and Ingrid Robeyns. 2003. "Exploring the Challenges of Amartya Sen's Work and Ideas: An Introduction." *Feminist Economics* 9 (2/3): 3. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1354570032000099039>.
- Alcoff, Linda Martín. 2006. *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*. Studies in Feminist Philosophy. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Alcoff, Linda Martín. 2012. "Is There an 'After' of Identity?" *Review Journal of Political Philosophy* 10 (January): 3–19.
- Alexander-Floyd, Nikol G. 2012. "Disappearing Acts: Reclaiming Intersectionality in the Social Sciences in a Post-Black Feminist Era." *Feminist Formations* 24 (1): 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ff.2012.0003>.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. 2012. *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. 4 ed. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. 2007. *The Ethics of Identity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. 2008. "Chapter 25: Sen's Identities." In *Arguments for a Better World: Essays in Honor of Amartya Sen: Volume I: Ethics, Welfare, and Measurement*, edited by Kaushik Basu and Ravi Kanbur, 475–488. Vol. 1. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199239115.001.0001>.
- Barvosa, Edwina. 2008. *Wealth of Selves: Multiple Identities, Mestiza Consciousness, and the Subject of Politics*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. 1989. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Howard Madison Parshley. Vintage Books ed. New York: Vintage Books.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 2015. "Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas." *Annual Review of Sociology* 41 (1): 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-073014-112142>.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989: 139–167.

- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1991. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43 (6): 1241–1299. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>.
- Curtin, Nicola, Abigail J. Stewart, and Elizabeth R. Cole. 2015. "Challenging the Status Quo: The Role of Intersectional Awareness in Activism for Social Change and Pro-Social Intergroup Attitudes." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 39 (4): 512–529. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684315580439>.
- Deaux, Kay. 1993. "Reconstructing Social Identity." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 19 (1): 4–12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167293191001>.
- Degraffenreid v. General Motors Assembly Div., Etc. 1976. "413 F. Supp. 142. Dist. Court."
- Du Bois, W. E. B. 1987. "The Souls of Black Folk." In *Writings*, 357–547. New York, NY: Library of America. <https://www.loa.org/books/39-writings/>.
- Eskelinen, Viivi, Tuuli Anna Renvik, Teemu Pauha, Jolanda Jetten, Jonas Kunst, Jolanda Noll, Anette Rohmann, and Inga Jasinskaja-Lahti. 2022. "Disentangling National and Religious Identification as Predictors of Support for Religious Minority Rights among Christian Majority Groups." *British Journal of Social Psychology* 61 (2): 550–568. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12496>.
- Fanon, Frantz. 2008. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press. <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/api/volumes/oclc/71286732.html>.
- Flores, Carolina. 2022. "Bad Believers: Evidence-Resistance, Rational Persuasion, and Social Change." *Rutgers University - School of Graduate Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.7282/t3-vy9h-5g28>.
- Garry, Ann. 2011. "Intersectionality, Metaphors, and the Multiplicity of Gender." *Hypatia* 26 (4): 826–850. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2011.01194.x>.
- Gasdaglis, Katherine, and Alex Madva. 2020. "Intersectionality as a Regulative Ideal." *Ergo, an Open Access Journal of Philosophy* 6 (44): 1287–1330. <https://doi.org/10.3998/ergo.12405314.0006.044>.
- Gasper, Des. 2020. "Amartya Sen, Social Theorizing and Contemporary India."
- Gawronski, Bertram, and Fritz Strack. 2012. *Cognitive Consistency: A Fundamental Principle in Social Cognition*. 1st ed. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.
- Gries, Thomas, Veronika Müller, and John T. Jost. 2022. "The Market for Belief Systems: A Formal Model of Ideological Choice." *Psychological Inquiry* 33 (2): 65–83. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1047840X.2022.2065128>.
- Hancock, Ange-Marie. 2016. *Intersectionality: An Intellectual History*. 1st ed. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Haney López, Ian. 2019. *Merge Left: Fusing Race and Class, Winning Elections, and Saving America*. New York: The New Press.
- Haslanger, Sally. 2012. *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Hepburn, R. W., and Iris Murdoch. 1956. "Symposium: Vision and Choice in Morality." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 30: 14–58.
- hooks, bell. 1994. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- Huntington, Samuel P. 1996. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

- Jaimes, M. Annette. 1992. *The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization, and Resistance*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Kaldor, Mary. 2019. "The Resurgence of Singular Identities: Possible Explanations." *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 20 (2): 134–144. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19452829.2019.1574291>.
- King, Deborah K. 1988. "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology." *Signs* 14 (1): 42–72.
- Kruglanski, Arie W., Jocelyn J. Bélanger, and Rohan Gunaratna. 2019. *The Three Pillars of Radicalization: Needs, Narratives, and Networks*. 1st ed. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190851125.001.0001>.
- Lorde, Audre. 2020. "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference." In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, 104–114. New York: Penguin Classics.
- Lugones, María. 2003. *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Madva, Alex. 2019. "Social Psychology, Phenomenology, and the Indeterminate Content of Unreflective Racial Bias." In *Race as Phenomena: Between Phenomenology and Philosophy of Race*, edited by Emily S. Lee, 87–106. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Madva, Alex, Daniel Kelly, and Michael Brownstein. 2023. "Change the People or Change the Policy? On the Moral Education of Antiracists." *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* January: 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10677-023-10363-7>.
- Mallon, Ron. 2016. *The Construction of Human Kinds*. 1st ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mikołajczak, Gosia, Julia C. Becker, and Aarti Iyer. 2022. "Women Who Challenge or Defend the Status Quo: Ingroup Identities as Predictors of Progressive and Reactionary Collective Action." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 52 (4): 626–641. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2842>.
- Mobsy, John S. 1907. "Letter, Assistant Attorney General John S. Mosby to Captain Sam Chapman." *The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History* (blog). June 4, 1907. <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/former-confederate-officer-slavery-and-civil-war-1907>.
- Moraga, Cherríe. 2015. "La Güera." In *This Bridge Called My Back, Fourth Edition: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, 22–29. 4th ed. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Moraga, Cherríe, and Gloria Anzaldúa. 2015. *This Bridge Called My Back, Fourth Edition: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. 4th ed. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Morrison, Toni. 2007. *The Bluest Eye*. Reprint ed. New York: Vintage.
- Morrison, Toni. 2019. *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations*. 1st ed. New York: Knopf.
- Movement for Black Lives. 2016. "Platform." The Movement for Black Lives. August 1, 2016. <https://web.archive.org/web/20170204030146/https://policy.m4bl.org/>.
- Mputubwele, Ngofeen, dir. 2020. "Black Italians Fight to Be Italian." *The New Yorker Radio Hour*. WNYC Studios. <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/tnyradiohour/segments/black-italians-fight-be-italian>.
- Phillips, Anne. 2009. *Multiculturalism without Culture*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

- Qizilbash, Mozaffar. 2014. "Identity, Reason and Choice." *Economics and Philosophy* 30 (1): 11–33. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266267114000029>.
- Reed-Sandoval, Amy. 2020. *Socially Undocumented: Identity and Immigration Justice*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Riddle, Karie Cross. 2019. "Reasoned Choice or Performative Care? Women's Transformative Peacebuilding Identities in Manipur, India." *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 20 (1): 54–68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19452829.2018.1546279>.
- Sehgal, Parul. 2022. "Seventy-Five Years After Indian Partition, Who Owns the Narrative?" *The New Yorker*, December 26, 2022. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/01/02/seventy-five-years-after-indian-partition-who-owns-the-narrative-saadathasan-manto-geetanjali-shree-tomb-of-sand>.
- Sen, Amartya. 1999. *Reason before Identity*. 1st ed. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sen, Amartya. 2005. *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity*. 1st ed. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Sen, Amartya. 2007. *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*. Reprint ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Sen, Amartya. 2008. "Violence, Identity and Poverty." *Journal of Peace Research* 45 (1): 5–15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343307084920>.
- Sen, Amartya. 2009a. *The Idea of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Sen, Amartya. 2009b. "The Fog of Identity." *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 8 (3): 285–288. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470594X09105388>.
- Sen, Amartya. 2014. "Justice and Identity." *Economics & Philosophy* 30 (1): 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266267114000017>.
- Settles, Isis H. 2006. "Use of an Intersectional Framework to Understand Black Women's Racial and Gender Identities." *Sex Roles* 54 (9–10): 589–601. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-006-9029-8>.
- Smaldino, Paul E. 2019. "Social Identity and Cooperation in Cultural Evolution." *Behavioural Processes, Behavioral Evolution* 161 (April): 108–116. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.beproc.2017.11.015>.
- Smith, Barbara, and Beverly Smith. 2015. "Across the Kitchen Table: A Sister-to-Sister Dialogue." In *This Bridge Called My Back, Fourth Edition: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, 111–125. 4th ed. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Spelman, Elizabeth V. 1988. "Woman: The One and the Many." In *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought*, 133–159. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Tajfel, Henri, and John C. Turner. 1979. "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict." In *Organizational Identity: A Reader*, edited by Mary Jo Hatch and Majken Schultz, 56–65. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Tam, Agnes. 2020. "Why Moral Reasoning Is Insufficient for Moral Progress." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 28 (1): 73–96. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jopp.12187>.
- Vinyeta, Kirsten, Kyle Powys Whyte, and Kathy Lynn. 2015. "Climate Change through an Intersectional Lens: Gendered Vulnerability and Resilience in Indigenous Communities in the United States." *Gen. Tech. Rep. PNW-GTR-923*. Portland, OR:

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Research Station. 72 p. 923. <https://doi.org/10.2737/PNW-GTR-923>.

Warnke, Georgia. 2008. *After Identity: Rethinking Race, Sex, and Gender*. 1st ed. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Wilkerson, William S. 2009. "Is It a Choice? Sexual Orientation as Interpretation." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 40 (1): 97–116. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9833.2009.01440.x>.

Wills, Vanessa. 2018. "What Could It Mean to Say, 'Capitalism Causes Sexism and Racism?'" *Philosophical Topics* 46 (2): 229–246.

van Zomeren, Martijn, Maja Kutlaca, and Felicity Turner-Zwinkels. 2018. "Integrating Who 'We' Are with What 'We' (Will Not) Stand for: A Further Extension of the Social Identity Model of Collective Action." *European Review of Social Psychology* 29 (1): 122–160. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10463283.2018.1479347>.