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Don't reduce Amartya Sen to a single identity!

Antoinette Baujard

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This paper reviews Amartya's Sen autobiography, *Home in the World. A Memoir* (Penguin Press, published 08/07/2021, 480 pages. ISBN: 9781846144868), focused on his thirty first years of life. I show that the book emphasizes how Sen values discussions and reason, the voice of each human being in their plurality, and their capacity to act in and on the world. I also support that, in this memoir, Sen succeeds in circumventing the standard misunderstandings of his major contributions, by taking seriously the different potential interpretations of the thinkers who influenced his line of thinking, and defending the one he considers valid. I illustrate this claim with five cases which, by highlighting his multiple identities, avoid associating Sen to a misguided tag.

Keywords:

Amartya Sen, Welfare, Discussion, Reason, Identities, Memoir

JEL codes:

B31, D63, D71, I31, I32

Don't reduce Amartya Sen to a single identity!¹

by Antoinette Baujard²

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Amartya Kumar Sen (1933-) is an outstanding Indian economist and philosopher. He is considered to be one of the world's foremost thinkers (by among others *Prospect Magazine* or *The New Republic*), with great influence on global policies and intellectual debate on every continent. Sen renewed the way we think about poverty, social justice, policy making and, last but not least, the prime importance of democracy. Not only has he held a number of leading posts (and without even applying for them, including Jadavpur University, Cambridge, Delhi, Harvard, and MIT) he has been awarded numerous honorary degrees. And as a former student of this unique temple of social choice theory, I note that the fourth such award given to Sen came from the University of Caen in 1987. Of the many prizes conferred on him the most significant was the 1998 Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Science, for his contribution to welfare economics, social choice theory and development economics.

Home in the World. A Memoir (2021, Penguin Press) is the long-awaited autobiography of his early life in five parts and twenty-six chapters. A memoir is a specific literary genre. My own understanding is that Sen did not wish to provide a confession, a self-analysis, or a systematic

¹ This text shall be published as a book review in the journal *History of Political Economy*. I wish to thank Muriel Gilardone, Steve Medema and Keith Tribe for their kind comments on previous versions of this review, however I am only responsible for the personal views expressed in it.

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account of his entire life. Rather, he has two main objects in view in surveying his personal trajectory and the influences on him up to his thirties.

First of all, the memoir overcomes the limitations in the reception of his work arising from the partiality of commentary on it, whether by social choice theorists, standard economists, sociologists, leftists, Occidentals, or white males; too often such misreadings have led his readers to miss the major points he intended to make. Secondly, there is a constant reminder of his core propositions, notably that all women and men have plural identities, not one single, unchanging identity; and that only the consistent use of reasoned argument in an open democracy can guarantee respect for human agency (the value of the voice of each human being in their plurality, and their capacity to act in and on the world).

In this review I will leave aside the details of Sen's biography, together with the many illuminating anecdotes and uplifting pieces of poetry – these should be read in the context of the book itself. I shall instead focus essentially on the first objective: that the memoir helps us to understand his main contributions by circumventing third-party perspectives.

Once someone becomes famous she or he runs the risk that anything they say is reinterpreted to fit the preoccupations of others, or as if a theory had been summarized in "a one-line *slogan*" (which Sraffa urged Sen not to do, as we learn in chapter 16, p.261). This dilution through fame can compromise the robustness of arguments, their leading principles and underlying theoretical propositions; in the process of reception the original argument can even be subverted to such an extent that it appears to support that which it was intended to rebut.

What can be done to restore the interpretation first intended by the scholar? Let us consider three alternatives.

Repeating the arguments in an additional paper proves to be an inefficient option – regardless of the reams written on the subject, how many economists are actually aware that there is no such thing as an Adam Smith Problem?

Highlighting the bias through which commentators read the contribution is another solution to avoid misinterpretations. Muriel Gilardone and I did so regarding Sen's capability approach (Baujard and Gilardone 2017). Starting from his disregarded claim that he was not a capability theorist, we argued Sen had introduced the capability approach as a strategy to extend the consideration of the persons' advantages and disadvantages beyond the problematic confinement of welfarism – according to which social welfare just depends on individual utilities, as we measure them in economics. But from the perspective of readers biased by a welfarist framework, this line of argument is unfortunately straightforwardly reinterpreted as a capability theory, hence as a refinement of welfarism. Regrettably, a capability theory permits the substitution of the demanding requirements of thinking and listening in particular contexts – which was Sen's target – by a systematic appeal to standard statistics – however richer than the previous version of welfarism that might be. We cannot deny that this reception represents progress in the measurement of welfare, but it is fair to say that the message Sen wanted to send has only been partly received.

When the thinker is still alive, there is a third alternative for ensuring that the reception of his works coincides with his original intention, and Sen makes use of this in his memoir. He does recognize a considerable number of influences on his thinking – the name index runs from pages 426 to 442 (!) – and each influence is positively associated with a name deserving of praise, and as being exceptionally important to him. He describes, in varying details, their intellectual legacy (e.g. his grandfather Kshiti Mohan, or his mentors Maurice Dobb and Piero Sraffa). He unequivocally highlights the different potential interpretations of each of these thinkers (e.g. Tagore, Marx) who have been most influential for him. Among these he introduces his own interpretation for example, how Sen receives Tagore or Marx, by contrast with the way that Europeans read Tagore, how leftists or rightists read Marx compared with what Sen was himself most impressed by. If the reader had a different interpretation (of Tagore, or of Marx), they would certainly misunderstand Sen. Hence this memoir readers indirect evidence to guide or realign their reading.

Let me enumerate five significant potential misinterpretations highlighted in the memoir.

First, Sen admits he is an Indian. But he is also a Bengali: his early life was both in Dhaka with his parents, which is today located in Bangladesh, and in Santiniketan with his grand-parents, which is today located in India. And he lived in Burma for a couple of years as a child. He comes from a Hindu family; his grandfather joined the Kabir Panth, which combined Hindu and Muslim religious ideas; and he describes himself as being in his youth rather a-religious. He is not a nationalist – I believe the choice of the title of the memoir is owed to Tagore's novel *The home and the World*, which he describes as a "'strong and gentle' warning against the corruptibility of nationalism" (p.92). Amartya Sen studied at the educational institution created by Rabindranath Tagore called *Siswa Bharathi*, which means "uniting the world" and which was formed by the best of the world's cultural heritage. A great deal of the book refers to his many other geographical identities; and it is fair to say that already back in 1963, Cambridge UK and Cambridge USA are just two among many. He could hardly answer the journalist's question presented as the opening of the first chapter: "Where do you consider to be your home?" This would probably mean something different in English for Americans ("where do you normally live?"), or for Bengalis ("Where is/are your families from?"). In any case, the answer would not be straightforward. Sen not only comes from many places in the world, he wishes that his home were not restricted to any specific parish.

Second, Rabindranath Tagore has been a great influence upon Amartya Sen – Tagore was a close friend of his mother's family, but it was only after his death that Amartya began to recognize his major importance. Sen devotes at least four chapters to Tagore's thinking. He recalls that, when Tagore received the Nobel prize for Literature, the Europeans and the Americans presented him as a romantic dreamer, an attractive eastern Indian poet; they admired his alleged mysticism and his rejection of reason. Sen is emphatically surprised by how unlikely and ill-informed this reception was, without denying or ignoring the beauty of Tagore's literature, poetry, theater, music and painting. Sen insists that Tagore had an open mind, he primarily devoted his life to reason and freedom, implying his full respect for scientific methods, and the importance of disentangling ethics from science.

Third, Sen presents himself as a leftist, given his major commitment to the reduction of poverty, inequalities and his certitude that the wider provision of health and education is central for development. He devotes a specific chapter to the reinterpretation of Marx, and describes in detail what he does and does not take from him. He retains Marx's focus on needs, which may explain, he suggests, the welcome creation of the NHS and of the welfare state in many European countries. He appreciates the discussion of objective illusions: one may believe workers and capitalists participate in free exchange, but you may perceive things differently when considering the bargaining power of the worker – whether a poor worker is actually "free" to decline a job. A stark illustration of the illusion of freedom is given by a traumatic experience Sen had as a child. Sen witnessed a man almost dying from a stab wound in his garden. Kader Mia was a Muslim man. Despite the dangerous tensions between the communities in India he was formally free to stay home, or to go and work in the Hindu area. As a father, his desire to feed his family more than anything else, including his own security, almost got him killed. In this example, Sen also shows that those killed in the Hindu-Muslim riots of the 1940s shared a class identity (the workers and dispossessed) although they differed in their religious or communal identity. Whilst freedom can be an illusion, it is important *per se*, and Sen does say that Marx was sometimes badly interpreted in this regards. He quotes a passage of *The German Ideology* which Sen says most authors "often tended to miss": Marx is positive about "bringing 'the conditions for the free development and activity of individuals under their own control'" (p.212), including the ability to "criticize after dinner" – a passage which, we might admit, leaves us with the impression that liberty of choice and freedom of expression might be important but that there is little to be found in Marx with which the sentiment might be defended. Sen observes that Marx did not in his claim regarding the "dictatorship of the proletariat" discuss what the proletariat's demand would be and could mean – for lack of a social choice approach. Not only was this absence "rather disappointing" (p.212), Sen overtly charges Marx responsibility for the authoritarian consequences of his lack of serious consideration of freedom and democratic issues. Sen recalls in several chapters that he was always dubious of Soviet practices (notably the show trials), insisting on the primary importance of democracy and freedom of speech.

Fourth, one of his identities is related to Trinity College Cambridge, renowned for its great intellectuals and its leftist tendencies. But when there he did not believe in the standard opposition between schools of thought that accompanied his years in Cambridge. Among the opposing camps there were neoclassical so-called mainstream economists and the neo-Keynesians rejecting the adequacy of the market economy – and also the Marxists: "The divisions between schools of economic thought seemed to play a mesmerizing role in Cambridge rhetoric, particularly in classifying economists into two distinct categories: friends or foes." (p.288) However Sen, along with a few others, appears very distant from this never-ending academic battle. On the one hand, none of these camps would take seriously the fundamental issues he wanted to work on: poverty, inequality, the wider provision of health and education. These issues were "seen as a non-subject" either way, and everybody recommended that he not work on social choice theory and welfare economics. Joan Robinson would assert something that Sen calls the most profound error in development thinking – that "in terms of priorities, what you have to concentrate on is simply maximizing economic growth"; then "you can turn to health care, education..." (p.287-288). Sen concluded that leftist heterodox economists did not think so very differently than mainstream economists did on the issues he

thought were essential. In passing, he makes the scathing observation that the most intelligent Professor of Economic Development he met in Cambridge, Peter Bauer, happened to be a rightist conservative neo-classical economist.

On the other hand, let me provide a second explanation for the acrimony we feel between the lines when Sen mentions Joan Robinson. The book devotes an impressive number of lines and pages to various compliments regarding Joan Robinson, noting also how familiar she was with India, how close she and her husband were with Sen. We also learn that he was not very impressed by her work on capital theory, but this theoretical assessment is not the central point he wants to make. Sen instead emphasizes that she never listened to any opposing arguments in any discussion, with any discussant. Her view on the importance Sen devoted to welfare issues was a problem for him, not because he was not convinced by her arguments regarding this importance, but because she had never entered this debate in the first place. Sen belongs to no one camp; he belongs the argumentative tradition of Indian philosophy: "I could not help thinking that the argumentative tradition that had been so persistently championed in Indian philosophical debates, and which included careful listening, could have made something of a contribution to Joan's convictions about what makes a thesis powerful. Her neglect of mainstream theories seemed to me to lack a reasoned defence, as did her rapid dismissal of the Marxian perspectives carefully developed by Dobb, Sraffa and Hobsbawm." (p.286)

For Sen, it is always necessary to provide reasoned argument in support of a thesis. A striking illustration is given in chapter 10. Sen spends pages and pages cautiously and respectfully addressing the thesis that the British Raj brought many advantages to India, before he concludes that he might not be convinced by this thesis after all. Should you (or Joan Robinson) find obvious or superfluous these long factual descriptions, analyses and caveats in elaborating the appropriate counterfactuals, you (she) would definitely miss what Sen finds essential. Assertions are only obvious in a certain context and from a certain perspective; hence it is worth thinking and weighing the reasons that make sense from a diversity of perspectives. Careful listening and consideration of every claim is indispensable, including the claims of the underprivileged, regardless of your institutional status, your worthy leftist sentiments or what is currently considered to be politically correct. The pleasure of any "agenda-less free discussion on any topic that might come up" (p.183) – called "adda" in Bengali – is nicely illustrated in the many pages in which Sen describes how he as a child was involved in discussion with each adult of his family, how while in Cambridge he spent his afternoons in cafés, in the Apostles Society, and in the socialist, liberal and conservative political clubs. Political and intellectual debate seems to be the most constant element of Sen's life, from his very early years with his family – his grand-father in particular – and whoever he encountered in his academic or his personal lives.

Fifth, Sen uncontroversially believes in reason. His knowledge of science, his practice of axiomatic and formal demonstration, is one element. Theorems and data analysis that he developed still play a prominent role in economics and development studies. But he is not what we could call a rationalist thinker, assuming there is a rational truth to be imposed from above. Sen was skeptical of the idea that the relevant questions were technical: "I found it difficult to believe that the downfall of capitalism, if that were to occur, would be caused by some sophisticated mistake in capital theory rather than because of the nasty way capitalism treats

human beings" (p.287). Much relevant information may arise in discussion involving a range of stakeholders, not to mention the essential participation of subalterns. Not only that, sentiment is essential in these reasoned debates. Sen quotes A. C. Pigou (p.287): "It is not wonder, but rather the social enthusiasm which revolts from the sordidness of mean streets and the joylessness of withered lives, that is the beginning of economic science." An illustration is given by the Bengal famine in 1943 which killed nearly 3 million people. The economic analysis of the famine was flawed. Seen from London, the quantity of food was sufficient at the macroeconomic level. Eventually the political reaction of the Raj to the famine was only due to indignation on the part of the British public. Information about the famine was eventually published in British newspapers, making the Bengali people closer to the English people: when Bengalis become, in their conscience and sentiments, England's neighbors.

In the cases we have just described (and many others), Amartya Sen is not where we expect him to be, and this does not ease our understanding. He never conforms to either side of the standard "friend or foe" opposition. To take full advantage of his body of works we must avoid confining him to labeled boxes. This both implies we should accept that he has multiple identities (which this memoir very much helps to clarify), and that we need to be aware of the particular perspective and bias from which we read his works.

The memoir is focused on his 30 first years of life, ranging from 1933 to 1963. That it stops somewhat abruptly after 407 pages is striking. 1963 is when Sen starts to become well-known for his contribution to poverty and social welfare issues! I confess this sudden end saddened me. I would have like to read more of his reflections, about the way he looks back on his life after he began to attract wider attention for his thinking . When I closed the book, I was eager to stay in Amartya K. Sen's delightful company. Because I learned so much of the intellectual debates in reading his memoir; because all that I have read in this memoir has opened my mind and clarified my thoughts about the world's woes and possible cures; because the memoir has been as much a pleasure to read as swimming in warm open water in the light of a rising sun. Whether Amartya Sen will have the energy to write the sequel for our own pleasure is still an open question, as I learned from his recent interviews. However, as far as one's history sets a person's identities (Giraud 2019: p. 645, Forget 2005), let us recognize that the two main objectives elaborated above have so far been met.

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