

CHAPTER I

THE VIOLENCE  
OF ILLUSION

Langston Hughes, the African-American writer, describes in his 1940 autobiography, *The Big Sea*, the exhilaration that seized him as he left New York for Africa. He threw his American books into the sea: “[I]t was like throwing a million bricks out of my heart.” He was on his way to his “Africa, Motherland of the negro people!” Soon he would experience “the real thing, to be touched and seen, not merely read about in a book.”<sup>1</sup> A sense of identity can be a source not merely of pride and joy, but also of strength and confidence. It is not surprising that the idea of identity receives such widespread admiration, from popular advocacy of loving your neighbor to high theories of social capital and of communitarian self-definition.

And yet identity can also kill—and kill with abandon. A strong—and exclusive—sense of belonging to one group can in

many cases carry with it the perception of distance and divergence from other groups. Within-group solidarity can help to feed between-group discord. We may suddenly be informed that we are not just Rwandans but specifically Hutus ("we hate Tutsis"), or that we are not really mere Yugoslavs but actually Serbs ("we absolutely don't like Muslims"). 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.

The sense of identity can make an important contribution to the strength and the warmth of our relations with others, such as neighbors, or members of the same community, or fellow citizens, or followers of the same religion. Our focus on particular identities can enrich our bonds and make us do many things for each other and can help to take us beyond our self-centered lives. The recent literature on "social capital," powerfully explored by Robert Putnam and others, has brought out clearly enough how an identity with others in the same social community can make the lives of all go much better in that community; a sense of belonging to a community is thus seen as a resource—like capital.<sup>2</sup> That understanding is important, but it has to be supplemented by a further recognition that a sense of identity can firmly exclude many people even as it warmly embraces others. The well-integrated community in which residents instinctively do absolutely wonderful things for each other with great immediacy and solidarity can be the very same community in which bricks are thrown through the windows of immigrants who move into the region from elsewhere.

The adversity of exclusion can be made to go hand in hand with the gifts of inclusion.

The cultivated violence associated with identity conflicts seems to repeat itself around the world with increasing persistence.<sup>3</sup> Even though the balance of power in Rwanda and Congo may have changed, the targeting of one group by another continues with much force. The marshaling of an aggressive Sudanese Islamic identity along with exploitation of racial divisions has led to the raping and killing of overpowered victims in the south of that appallingly militarized polity. Israel and Palestine continue to experience the fury of dichotomized identities ready to inflict hateful penalties on the other side. Al Qaeda relies heavily on cultivating and exploiting a militant Islamic identity specifically aimed against Western people.

And reports keep coming in, from Abu Ghraib and elsewhere, that the activities of some American or British soldiers sent out to fight for the cause of freedom and democracy included what is called a "softening-up" of prisoners in utterly inhuman ways. Unrestrained power over the lives of suspected enemy combatants, or presumed miscreants, sharply bifurcates the prisoners and the custodians across a hardened line of divisive identities ("they are a separate breed from us"). It seems to crowd out, often enough, any consideration of other, less confrontational features of the people on the opposite side of the breach, including, among other things, their shared membership of the human race.

### Recognition of Competing Affiliations

If identity-based thinking can be amenable to such brutal manipulation, where can the remedy be found? It can hardly be sought

in trying to suppress or stifle the invoking of identity in general. For one thing, identity can be a source of richness and warmth as well as of violence and terror, and it would make little sense to treat identity as a general evil. Rather, we have to draw on the understanding that the force of a bellicose identity can be challenged by the power of *competing* identities. These can, of course, include the broad commonality of our shared humanity, but also many other identities that everyone simultaneously has. This leads to other ways of classifying people, which can restrain the exploitation of a specifically aggressive use of one particular categorization.

A Hutu laborer from Kigali may be pressured to see himself only as a Hutu and incited to kill Tutsis, and yet he is not only a Hutu, but also a Kigalian, a Rwandan, an African, a laborer, and a human being. Along with the recognition of the plurality of our identities and their diverse implications, there is a critically important need to see the role of *choice* in determining the cogency and relevance of particular identities which are inescapably diverse.

That may be plain enough, but it is important to see that this illusion receives well-intentioned but rather disastrous support from practitioners of a variety of respected—and indeed highly respectable—schools of intellectual thought. They include, among others, dedicated communitarians who take the community identity to be peerless and paramount in a predetermined way, as if by nature, without any need for human volition (just “recognition”—to use a much-loved concept), and also unswerving cultural theorists who partition the people of the world into little boxes of disparate civilizations.

In our normal lives, we see ourselves as members of a variety of groups—we belong to all of them. A person’s citizenship, residence, geographic origin, gender, class, politics, profession,

employment, food habits, sports interests, taste in music, social commitments, etc., make us members of a variety of groups. Each of these collectivities, to all of which this person simultaneously belongs, gives her a particular identity. None of them can be taken to be the person’s only identity or singular membership category.

### Constraints and Freedoms

Many communitarian thinkers tend to argue that a dominant communal identity is only a matter of self-realization, not of choice. It is, however, hard to believe that a person really has no choice in deciding what relative importance to attach to the various groups to which he or she belongs, and that she must just “discover” her identities, as if it were a purely natural phenomenon (like determining whether it is day or night). In fact, we are all constantly making choices, if only implicitly, about the priorities to be attached to our different affiliations and associations. The freedom to determine our loyalties and priorities between the different groups to all of which we may belong is a peculiarly important liberty which we have reason to recognize, value, and defend.

The existence of choice does not, of course, indicate that there are no constraints restricting choice. Indeed, choices are always made within the limits of what are seen as feasible. The feasibilities in the case of identities will depend on individual characteristics and circumstances that determine the alternative possibilities open to us. This, however, is *not* a remarkable fact. It is just the way every choice in any field is actually faced. Indeed, nothing can be more elementary and universal than the fact that choices of all kinds in every area are always made within particular limits. For example, when we decide what to buy at

the market, we can hardly ignore the fact that there are limits on how much we can spend. The "budget constraint," as economists call it, is omnipresent. The fact that every buyer has to make choices does not indicate that there is no budget constraint, but only that choices have to be made *within* the budget constraint the person faces.

What is true in elementary economics is also true in complex political and social decisions. Even when one is inescapably seen—by oneself as well as by others—as French, or Jewish, or Brazilian, or African-American, or (particularly in the context of the present-day turmoil) as an Arab or as a Muslim, one still has to decide what exact importance to attach to that identity over the relevance of other categories to which one also belongs.

### Convincing Others

However, even when we are clear about how we want to see ourselves, we may still have difficulty in being able to persuade *others* to see us in just that way. A nonwhite person in apartheid-dominated South Africa could not insist that she be treated just as a human being, irrespective of her racial characteristics. She would typically have been placed in the category that the state and the dominant members of the society reserved for her. Our freedom to assert our personal identities can sometimes be extraordinarily limited in the eyes of others, no matter how we see ourselves.

Indeed, sometimes we may not even be fully aware how others identify us, which may differ from self-perception. There is an interesting lesson in an old Italian story—from the 1920s when support for fascist politics was spreading rapidly across Italy—

concerning a political recruiter from the Fascist Party arguing with a rural socialist that he should join the Fascist Party instead. "How can I," said the potential recruit, "join your party? My father was a socialist. My grandfather was a socialist. I cannot really join the Fascist Party." "What kind of an argument is this?" said the Fascist recruiter, reasonably enough. "What would you have done," he asked the rural socialist, "if your father had been a murderer and your grandfather had also been a murderer? What would you have done then?" "Ah, then," said the potential recruit, "then, of course, I would have joined the Fascist Party."

This may be a case of fairly reasonable, even benign, attribution, but quite often ascription goes with denigration, which is used to incite violence against the vilified person. "The Jew is a man," Jean-Paul Sartre argued in *Portrait of the Anti-Semite*, "whom other men look upon as a Jew; . . . it is the anti-Semite who *makes* the Jew." Charged attributions can incorporate two distinct but interrelated distortions: misdescription of people belonging to a targeted category, and an insistence that the misdescribed characteristics are the only relevant features of the targeted person's identity. In opposing external imposition, a person can both try to resist the ascription of particular characteristics and point to other identities a person has, much as Shylock attempted to do in Shakespeare's brilliantly cluttered story: "Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is?"<sup>5</sup>

The assertion of human commonality has been a part of resistance to degrading attributions in different cultures at different points in time. In the Indian epic *Mahabharata*, dating from around two thousand years ago, Bharadvaja, an argumentative interlocutor, responds to the defense of the caste system by

Bhriḡu (a pillar of the establishment) by asking: "We all seem to be affected by desire, anger, fear, sorrow, worry, hunger, and labor; how do we have caste differences then?"

The foundations of degradation include not only descriptive misrepresentation, but also the illusion of a singular identity that others must attribute to the person to be demeaned. "There used to be a me," Peter Sellers, the English actor, said in a famous interview, "but I had it surgically removed." That removal is challenging enough, but no less radical is the surgical implantation of a "real me" by others who are determined to make us different from what we think we are. Organized attribution can prepare the ground for persecution and burial.

Furthermore, even if in particular circumstances people have difficulty in convincing others to acknowledge the relevance of identities other than what is marshaled for the purpose of denigration (along with descriptive distortions of the ascribed identity), that is not reason enough to ignore those other identities when circumstances are different. This applies, for example, to Jewish people in Israel today, rather than in Germany in the 1930s. It would be a long-run victory of Nazism if the barbarities of the 1930s eliminated forever a Jewish person's freedom and ability to invoke any identity other than his or her Jewishness.

Similarly, the role of reasoned choice needs emphasis in resisting the ascription of singular identities and the recruitment of foot soldiers in the bloody campaign to terrorize targeted victims. Campaigns to switch perceived self-identities have been responsible for many atrocities in the world, making old friends into new enemies and odious sectarians into suddenly powerful political leaders. The need to recognize the role of reasoning and choice in identity-based thinking is thus both exacting and extremely important.

## Denial of Choice and Responsibility

If choices do exist and yet it is assumed that they are not there, the use of reasoning may well be replaced by uncritical acceptance of conformist behavior, no matter how rejectable it may be. Typically, such conformism tends to have conservative implications, and works in the direction of shielding old customs and practices from intelligent scrutiny. Indeed, traditional inequalities, such as unequal treatment of women in sexist societies (and even violence against them), or discrimination against members of other racial groups, survive by the unquestioning acceptance of received beliefs (including the subservient roles of the traditional underdog). Many past practices and assumed identities have crumbled in response to questioning and scrutiny. Traditions can shift even within a particular country and culture. It is perhaps worth recollecting that John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women*, published in 1874, was taken by many of his British readers to be the ultimate proof of his eccentricity, and as a matter of fact, interest in the subject was so minimal that this is the only book of Mill's on which his publisher lost money.<sup>6</sup>

However, the unquestioning acceptance of a social identity may not always have traditionalist implications. It can also involve a radical reorientation in identity which could then be sold as a piece of alleged "discovery" without reasoned choice. This can play an awesome role in the fomenting of violence. My disturbing memories of Hindu-Muslim riots in India in the 1940s, to which I referred earlier, include seeing—with the bewildered eyes of a child—the massive identity shifts that followed divisive politics. A great many persons' identities as Indians, as subcontinentals, as Asians, or as members of the human race, seemed to give way—

quite suddenly—to sectarian identification with Hindu, Muslim, or Sikh communities. The carnage that followed had much to do with elementary herd behavior by which people were made to “discover” their newly detected belligerent identities, without subjecting the process to critical examination. The same people were suddenly different.

### Civilizational Incarceration

A remarkable use of imagined singularity can be found in the basic classificatory idea that serves as the intellectual background to the much-discussed thesis of “the clash of civilizations,” which has been championed recently, particularly following the publication of Samuel Huntington’s influential book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*.<sup>7</sup> The difficulty with this approach begins with unique categorization, well before the issue of a clash—or not—is even raised. Indeed, the thesis of a civilizational *clash* is conceptually parasitic on the commanding power of a unique *categorization* along so-called civilizational lines, which as it happens closely follows religious divisions to which singular attention is paid. Huntington contrasts Western civilization with “Islamic civilization,” “Hindu civilization,” “Buddhist civilization,” and so on. The alleged confrontations of religious differences are incorporated into a sharply carpentered vision of one dominant and hardened divisiveness.

In fact, of course, the people of the world can be classified according to many other systems of partitioning, each of which has some—often far-reaching—relevance in our lives: such as nationalities, locations, classes, occupations, social status, languages, politics, and many others. While religious categories have

received much airing in recent years, they cannot be presumed to obliterate other distinctions, and even less can they be seen as the only relevant system of classifying people across the globe. In partitioning the population of the world into those belonging to “the Islamic world,” “the Western world,” “the Hindu world,” “the Buddhist world,” the divisive power of classificatory priority is implicitly used to place people firmly inside a unique set of rigid boxes. Other divisions (say, between the rich and the poor, between members of different classes and occupations, between people of different politics, between distinct nationalities and residential locations, between language groups, etc.) are all submerged by this allegedly primal way of seeing the differences between people.

The difficulty with the thesis of the clash of civilizations begins well before we come to the issue of an inevitable clash; it begins with the presumption of the unique relevance of a singular classification. Indeed, the question “do civilizations clash?” is founded on the presumption that humanity can be preeminently classified into distinct and discrete civilizations, and that the relations *between different human beings* can somehow be seen, without serious loss of understanding, in terms of relations *between different civilizations*. The basic flaw of the thesis much precedes the point where it is asked whether civilizations must *clash*.

This reductionist view is typically combined, I am afraid, with a rather foggy perception of world history which overlooks, first, the extent of *internal* diversities within these civilizational categories, and second, the reach and influence of *interactions*—intellectual as well as material—that go right across the regional borders of so-called civilizations (more on this in chapter 3). And its power to befuddle can trap not only those who would like to support the thesis of a clash (varying from Western chauvinists to Islamic fundamentalists), but also those who would like to *dispute*

it and yet try to respond within the straitjacket of its prespecified terms of reference.

The limitations of such civilization-based thinking can prove to be just as treacherous for programs of “dialogue among civilizations” (something that seems to be much sought after these days) as they are for theories of a clash of civilizations. The noble and elevating search for amity among people seen as amity between civilizations speedily reduces many-sided human beings into one dimension each and muzzles the variety of involvements that have provided rich and diverse grounds for cross-border interactions over many centuries, including the arts, literature, science, mathematics, games, trade, politics, and other arenas of shared human interest. Well-meaning attempts at pursuing global peace can have very counterproductive consequences when these attempts are founded on a fundamentally illusory understanding of the world of human beings.

### More than a Federation of Religions

Increasing reliance on religion-based classification of the people of the world also tends to make the Western response to global terrorism and conflict peculiarly ham-handed. Respect for “other people” is shown by praising their religious books, rather than by taking note of the many-sided involvements and achievements, in nonreligious as well as religious fields, of different people in a globally interactive world. In confronting what is called “Islamic terrorism,” in the muddled vocabulary of contemporary global politics, the intellectual force of Western policy is aimed quite substantially at trying to define—or redefine—Islam.

However, to focus just on the grand religious classification is

not only to miss other significant concerns and ideas that move people, it also has the effect of generally magnifying the voice of religious authority. The Muslim clerics, for example, are then treated as the *ex officio* spokesmen for the so-called Islamic world, even though a great many people who happen to be Muslim by religion have profound differences with what is proposed by one mullah or another. Despite our *diverse diversities*, the world is suddenly seen not as a collection of people, but as a federation of religions and civilizations. In Britain a confounded view of what a multiethnic society must do has led to encouraging the development of state-financed Muslim schools, Hindu schools, Sikh schools, etc., to supplement preexisting state-supported Christian schools, and young children are powerfully placed in the domain of singular affiliations well before they have the ability to reason about different systems of identification that may compete for their attention. Earlier on, state-run denominational schools in Northern Ireland had fed the political distancing of Catholics and Protestants along one line of divisive categorization assigned at infancy, and the same predetermination of “discovered” identities is now being allowed and, in effect, encouraged to sow even more alienation among a different part of the British population.

Religious or civilizational classification can, of course, be a source of belligerent distortion as well. It can, for example, take the form of crude beliefs well exemplified by U.S. Lieutenant General William Boykin’s blaring—and by now well-known—remark describing his battle against Muslims with disarming coarseness: “I knew that my God was bigger than his,” and that the Christian God “was a real God, and [the Muslim’s] was an idol.”<sup>8</sup> The idiocy of such dense bigotry is, of course, easy to diagnose, and for this reason there is, I believe, comparatively limited danger in the uncouth hurling of such unguided missiles. There is, in contrast, a much more serious problem in the

use in Western public policy of intellectual “guided missiles” that present a superficially nobler vision to woo Muslim activists away from opposition through the apparently benign strategy of defining Islam appropriately. They try to wrench Islamic terrorists from violence by insisting that Islam is a religion of peace, and that a “true Muslim” must be a tolerant individual (“so come off it and be peaceful”). The rejection of a confrontational view of Islam is certainly appropriate and extremely important at this time, but we must also ask whether it is at all necessary or useful, or even possible, to try to define in largely political terms what a “true Muslim” must be like.<sup>9</sup>

### Muslims and Intellectual Diversity

A person’s religion need not be his or her all-encompassing and exclusive identity. In particular, Islam, as a religion, does not obliterate responsible choice for Muslims in many spheres of life. Indeed, it is possible for one Muslim to take a confrontational view and another to be thoroughly tolerant of heterodoxy without either of them ceasing to be a Muslim for that reason alone.

The response to Islamic fundamentalism and to the terrorism linked with it also becomes particularly confused when there is a general failure to distinguish between Islamic history and the history of Muslim people. Muslims, like all other people in the world, have many different pursuits, and not all of their priorities and values need be placed within their singular identity of being Islamic (I shall go more into this issue in chapter 4). It is, of course, not surprising at all that the champions of Islamic fundamentalism would like to suppress all other identities of Muslims in favor of being only Islamic. But it is extremely odd that

those who want to overcome the tensions and conflicts linked with Islamic fundamentalism also seem unable to see Muslim people in any form other than their being just Islamic, which is combined with attempts to redefine Islam, rather than seeing the many-dimensional nature of diverse human beings who happen to be Muslim.

People see themselves—and have reason to see themselves—in many different ways. For example, a Bangladeshi Muslim is not only a Muslim but also a Bengali and a Bangladeshi, typically quite proud of the Bengali language, literature, and music, not to mention the other identities he or she may have connected with class, gender, occupation, politics, aesthetic taste, and so on. Bangladesh’s separation from Pakistan was not based on religion at all, since a Muslim identity was shared by the bulk of the population in the two wings of undivided Pakistan. The separatist issues related to language, literature, and politics.

Similarly, there is no empirical reason at all why champions of the Muslim past, or for that matter of the Arab heritage, have to concentrate specifically on religious beliefs only, and not also on science and mathematics, to which Arab and Muslim societies have contributed so much, and which can also be part of a Muslim or an Arab identity. Despite the importance of this heritage, crude classifications have tended to put science and mathematics in the basket of “Western science,” leaving other people to mine their pride in religious depths. If the disaffected Arab activist today can take pride only in the purity of Islam, rather than in the many-sided richness of Arab history, the unique prioritization of religion, shared by warriors on both sides, plays a major part in incarcerating people within the enclosure of a singular identity.

Even the frantic Western search for “the moderate Muslim” confounds moderation in political beliefs with moderateness of religious faith. A person can have strong religious faith—Islamic

or any other—along with tolerant politics. Emperor Saladin, who fought valiantly for Islam in the Crusades in the twelfth century, could offer, without any contradiction, an honored place in his Egyptian royal court to Maimonides as that distinguished Jewish philosopher fled an intolerant Europe. When, at the turn of the sixteenth century, the heretic Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake in Campo dei Fiori in Rome, the Great Mughal emperor Akbar (who was born a Muslim and died a Muslim) had just finished, in Agra, his large project of legally codifying minority rights, including religious freedom for all.

The point that needs particular attention is that while Akbar was free to pursue his liberal politics without ceasing to be a Muslim, that liberality was in no way ordained—nor of course prohibited—by Islam. Another Mughal emperor, Aurangzeb, could deny minority rights and persecute non-Muslims without, for that reason, failing to be a Muslim, in exactly the same way that Akbar did not terminate being a Muslim because of his tolerantly pluralist politics.

### The Flames of Confusion

The insistence, if only implicitly, on a choiceless singularity of human identity not only diminishes us all, it also makes the world much more flammable. The alternative to the divisiveness of one preeminent categorization is not any unreal claim that we are all much the same. That we are not. Rather, the main hope of harmony in our troubled world lies in the plurality of our identities, which cut across each other and work against sharp divisions around one single hardened line of vehement division that allegedly cannot be resisted. Our shared humanity gets savagely

challenged when our differences are narrowed into one devised system of uniquely powerful categorization.

Perhaps the worst impairment comes from the neglect—and denial—of the role of reasoning and choice, which follows from the recognition of our plural identities. The illusion of unique identity is much more divisive than the universe of plural and diverse classifications that characterize the world in which we actually live. The descriptive weakness of choiceless singularity has the effect of momentarily impoverishing the power and reach of our social and political reasoning. The illusion of destiny exacts a remarkably heavy price.