Beyond the Melting Pot
Two well-regarded liberals take on multiculturalism

Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers
By Kwame Anthony Appiah
W. W. Norton, 2006, $23.95; 196 pages.

Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny
By Amartya Sen

As reviewed by Nathan Glazer

The books reviewed here are the first to be published in a series titled “Issues of Our Times,” edited by the omnipresent Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr., whose picture, with a brief statement, prefaces each. The volumes are by two prominent intellectuals who stand at the height of academic life in the West, and who, because of their origins in Africa and India, are thought of as spokesmen, in some of their work, for the third world, a role they accept. They were both educated at Cambridge University in England and hold major appointments in leading American universities.

Kwame Appiah, a professor of philosophy at Princeton, formerly at Harvard, has written books in technical philosophy and on current issues of race and multiculturalism. Amartya Sen, winner of the Nobel Prize in economics, is university professor at Harvard, formerly master of Trinity College, Cambridge, and also a philosopher, with a prodigious and influential bibliography on technical issues in economics, welfare economics, economic development, social philosophy, the role of the non-Western world in world civilization, and the importance of Indian thought and science, among other topics.

I was alerted to the idea that something of interest to educators was going on in this series when Appiah presented the major thesis of his book in an article in the New York Times Magazine. It was summarized starkly on the front cover of the publication as favoring “individuals” against “peoples,” the “mixed” against the “pure,” “modernity” against “authenticity,” “rights” against “traditions,” “contamination” against “preservation.” And Sen, in his title alone, is clearly taking a critical stance against “identity.” What’s going on here? We are used to attacks on multiculturalism (now so solidly established in social studies in elementary and high schools) from the right, from conservatives who are alarmed at a diminution of loyalty to the nation as other loyalties are promoted. But criticism from these leading intellectuals who are certainly liberal at the least?

A Sophisticated Pollution
Indeed, both authors look skeptically at multiculturalism, which we know can mean many things, but they are as critical of hard multiculturalism, which makes a fetish of the notion that each major race or ethnic group or religious group carries a distinct culture that should be preserved and promoted, as of soft multiculturalism, which simply promotes tolerance and understanding of one group for another. Not of course that either is against tolerance and understanding: How could they be, as an Indian and an African coming years ago to England to be educated, and dependent on Western tolerance and understanding—which from their accounts was less evident in the past than today? But in soft multiculturalism Sen in particular sees an essentialization of one identity, generally the religious. This raises some difficult problems for a society based on reasoned discussion among persons who bear many identities and privileges none. That is the society Sen would like to see promoted in our schools.

Appiah would agree (both refer to the other’s works favorably). What he prefers for our increasingly “mixed” societies is “cosmopolitanism,” which goes well beyond tolerance and understanding to a more active interplay among groups and individuals in which traits are generalized to the point where they cannot be identified as being of one group or another. Yes, “contamination”—so it would appear to the religious or cultural purist—is a positive good for Appiah. Sen coins the term “plural monoculturalism” for what I have called “hard” multiculturalism and criticizes developments in British education that are promoting such plural monoculturalism. Britain has for a long time been among the most “multicultural” of the European countries, offering citizenship, voting rights, and equal access to housing, education, and welfare to immigrants from the former empire. Sen applauds this achievement. But recently Britain has begun providing public aid to Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu schools. How could it not when it has long given public support to Catholic and Protestant and Jewish schools?

Distinguishing the Ethnic from the Religious
But to Sen, Britain has been trapped by this practice into taking religious identity as primary, and into fostering this identity, because these schools will teach the tenets of their distinctive religions to young minds incapable of making mature judgments.

Sen is of course no British nationalist. (He is a citizen of India.) It is not because of the weakening of a common
British identity that he views this development with alarm. Lord Tebbit pronounced that the proper test of integration for the British immigrant and his children was whether they cheered for Britain’s cricket team when it played against a Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi, or Caribbean squad. Not so for Sen. Indeed, he tells us he has on occasion cheered the Pakistani team when it played India. What worries him is the strengthening of an identity present at birth, rather than chosen through free and reasoned choice, and implanted among children before they have the opportunity to use reason and engage in discussion. And these identities have become on occasion in the last half-century the basis of murderous violence against others. He asks why, when Tony Blair acts to promote tolerance and understanding among communities, he reaches out to their religious leaders, rather than to those engaged in civil pursuits. Sen could make the same criticism of President Bush, who in the wake of 9/11 posed with Muslim clerics at the White House to dampen anger and hostility against Muslims. Sen would insist a Muslim is more than just a Muslim, and this identity should not be taken as central, all-determining.

Sen concentrates on Britain because he was there when the issue became urgent with the publication of the report of the “Commission on the Future of Multi-ethnic Britain,” chaired by Lord Bhikhu Parekh. It favored for Britain “a looser federation of cultures held together by common bonds of affection . . . .” But this was more or less what Ali Mazrui wrote 15 years ago in the report of a commission on multiculturalism in New York State schools, and it provoked the same counterattack from those who saw this as weakening a necessary common loyalty to the existing state. This does not bother Sen, who rather hopes for a widening global consciousness and concern for others: his fear is that religion-based separate identities will be strengthened. Fortunately, we are protected from that in the United States, where we have such strong constitutional limits on allowing religion into the public schools. But I think Sen (and Appiah, too) would find the replacement of religious identity with ethnic and racial identity, which is fostered with a heavy hand in various parts of the curricula common in American schools, just as limiting, binding students into one standard uniform when they might prefer to wear others, or none.

Identity Politics
Sen often lists a catalog of possible identities that any one individual may bear when he criticizes taking one identity as central or determining or unchanging. Sometimes in these catalogs of identities the trivial is listed along with the more significant. Yet at any given time, one identity may become central and nothing else matters: like the identity Jewish in Nazi Europe. Or the identity Hindu or Muslim in the murderous rages that accompanied India’s partition and independence, which the young Sen witnessed. One understands why he wants to resist the hypostatizing of one identity: yet for much of the world the religious or racial or ethnic identity is overwhelming, and becomes a matter of life and death.

For both Sen and Appiah, one senses a leaning over backwards to weaken the identification of Muslim with an enemy of the West and modernity, or African with the primitive. Fair enough, but sometimes this goes too far. So Appiah, trying to make his readers understand an African practice they will find abhorrent, rehearses the arguments those who practice female genital cutting will give to counter criticism, but then continues: “I am not endorsing these claims . . . . But let’s recognize this simple fact: a large part of what we do we do because it is just what we do. You get up in the morning at eight-thirty. Why that time?” One detects the influence of training in recent English philosophy, which often uses too trivial examples (what time you get up, for example) to make important points.

The larger mission of both books is to counter narrow and simple identities, to celebrate a modern world of contact and mixture and diversity in which no culture belongs just to one people or religion or nation. Appiah makes a powerful and surprising argument against the idea that the cultural artifacts of long-gone civilizations uncovered in archaeological digs should belong to the nation that currently occupies that ground rather than the world. But a world consciousness as yet is found only among a favored few. And we will have to live for a long time with many who do privilege just one identity, even one that may well foster violence.

Nathan Glazer is professor of education and sociology emeritus at Harvard University, and co-author, with Daniel Patrick Moynihan, of Beyond the Melting Pot (1964).