

Group Membership or Identity?

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Liberal cosmopolitans, Dasgupta and Goyal say, argue that identity should primarily be recognised as “unfettered choices by individuals regarding where they belong” (2019, 396). If identity thus consists of some inherited dimensions, complemented and/or completed by deliberative choice, then identity is fundamentally multiple. However, Dasgupta and Goyal observe that “all over the world we see people defining themselves in narrow, exclusive terms and being so regarded by others” (396). The key point in their paper is to give an economic explanation of the emergence of narrow identities and, by doing so, to show that narrow identities may be in certain cases individually and socially desired. This, of course, is quite a surprising result—one that stands in opposition to the liberal claim and belief that choosing and recognising multiple identities is necessarily always better. How do Dasgupta and Goyal (2019; henceforth DG) achieve this result?

I. DASGUPTA AND GOYAL’S MODEL

A key aspect of their model is the idea that groups impose positive and negative externalities on other groups. A group’s payoff always increases in own-group size, and this increase is, by assumption, equally distributed among the members of the group.¹ Hence, joining a group is always advantageous, and this might lead us to believe that joining all groups may be best for all. This is indeed the case as long as there are no (or at least only positive) spill-overs between groups, and as long as joining any group comes at no (or a sufficiently small) cost. The situation becomes more complicated, as expected, with negative spill-overs. As is common with externalities, they are not considered by individual agents who are concerned for their own benefit, and who do not notice the costs their

¹ Later in the text, DG (2019) also discuss the case where payoff division is such that group size is a public good to which all individuals have equal access.

actions impose on other agents. If an agent belongs to a group and then joins another group, this may lead to costs for the original group due to negative spill-overs. That is, payoffs in the first group are then decreasing with the membership size of the second group. This is why, in some cases, it would be socially more efficient to have a single group. At the same time, however, an individual has an incentive to deviate from single group membership as the gain from an additional group membership accrues fully to the individual, while the costs of that additional group membership are shared among all members of the first group. Clearly, if the negative spill-overs are high, relative to the additional gain from an extra group membership, single membership will automatically emerge. In any other case, multiple memberships emerge—these, however, are not socially efficient due to costly negative externalities. Imposing a rule that requires exclusive memberships may remedy this inefficiency.

Hence, given this model, we can distil three key messages. (1) Contrary to claims by liberal cosmopolitans, there are cases in which ‘unfettered choices by individuals regarding where they belong’ lead to single membership or, in DG’s words, ‘narrow identity’, and not to multiple identities. (2) A narrow identity may be individually and socially more efficient than multiple identities. (3) ‘Fettered choices’—choices constrained by rules imposing exclusive group memberships—may lead to a socially and individually efficient outcome.

As is often the case with economic models, we judge them to be good models when they produce novel and/or counterintuitive results. Given the tendency, I may say, among liberal academics to adhere to the claims of liberal cosmopolitanism (possibly because we often have multiple identities ourselves—coming from one country but working in another, for example), DG’s results are indeed counterintuitive and quite surprising. Do these results give us enough reason to doubt and revise our own liberal intuitions, which are to acknowledge our multiple identities?

In what follows, I will argue for the idea that we should *not* revise our liberal intuitions. First, I will show that there is a difference between reasons for group or identity choice and reasoning about those reasons, which is a liberal and, so far, primarily *normative* concern. I will then question whether playing a strategic game, as DG propose, responds to such liberal concern. I will next distinguish between different contexts in which group or identity choices can take place and argue that had such contexts been more explicit in DG’s model, then DG’s results on narrowness may have been less convincing. That is, we would have arguably

found a narrow identity only in very extreme cases. However, I will also argue that DG's definition of a narrow identity may not fully coincide with what we commonly understand under 'narrow identity'. Finally, I will question the idea that identity can be represented by one's group choice. While this is a convenient representation of identity for the purpose of a model, it is doubtful that DG's claim—that "the very richness of the notion [of identity] suggests it may pay to distil it into an almost 'presocietal' form" (2019, 396)—holds. At least, there should have been a more prominent effort to show what exactly we can learn from the results of the model about real-world issues.

II. NORMATIVE VERSUS POSITIVE

DG's explicit aim is to provide an explanation for why "all over the world we see individuals defining themselves in narrow and exclusive terms" (2019, 414). They contrast this explanation with the liberal view that people have multiple identities, and that the "sanctity of narrow social identities by those having them are unwarranted, even delusional" (396). However, the liberal cosmopolitan view that unfettered choices will lead to the recognition of us having multiple identities is a normative 'call', rather than an empirical claim. It is an empirical fact for liberals that we *have* multiple identities as we belong, even without any prior choice, to different 'groups' simply by being born at a particular time and place into a particular family. But it is a normative issue that—in Amartya Sen's words, an author singled out as a 'liberal cosmopolitan' by DG—" [w]e do have the opportunity to determine the weights we have reason to place on our different associations and distinct identities" (Sen 2004, 86). Sen insists that:

The reasoning in the choice of relevant identities must [...] go well beyond the purely intellectual into contingent social significance. Not only is reason involved in the choice of identity, but it may require some collateral social analysis of the grounds of relevance. (Sen 2004, 86)

Hence, unfettered choices do not simply amount to the decision to join one or more groups. Sen's key point on identity is actually twofold. First, there is always an element of choice involved in determining one's identity. We do not simply 'discover' the identity we are born into, and we do not have to uncritically adhere to it; we are always left with some choice. Second, choosing means evaluating *which* group memberships we give

priority and also *why* we do so. This implies that there is always a self-reflective and critical element in determining ‘who we are’. That is, even if we are born into particular groups and have not, strictly speaking, chosen to belong to them, it is our prerogative to evaluate how much importance we give to those group memberships. If we engage in such evaluation—which, according to Sen, we *should*—then we unmistakably recognise the empirical fact that we always have multiple attachments and affiliations—that is, multiple identities—to which we give different priorities.

III. REASONS FOR CHOICE

Sen has been quite silent on what, exactly, is involved in reasoning about the weighting of identities and how this reasoning should work. The question we may thus ask is: what does this *reasoning* process involve? Does it mean playing some strategic game, as in DG’s model? If yes, then reasoning may lead to the recognition of some narrow identity only. In that case, liberal cosmopolitans such as Sen would be mistaken about their view that people would necessarily recognise multiple identities.

As is typical with economic choices, agents understand payoffs in terms of costs and benefits, and the highest payoff is usually the most attractive one. What we know about the payoffs in the given model is that they depend primarily on the interplay between one’s own and another group’s size. Group size is thus the primary operative *reason* in DG’s model and it is indeed a plausible reason in certain contexts. For example, a bigger fan club might be better at promoting and financing a club, a greater Amnesty International or Greenpeace presence might give more force to their respective initiatives, a higher number of Fridays-for-Future demonstrators might amplify their message for action. DG mention the promotion of fundamental research or the chance of obtaining public funds, which might improve the higher the number of group members is. In their model, payoffs literally increase with own-group size, and either increase or decrease—depending on the valence of the respective spillover—with the other group’s size.

This means that, in this model, no difference is made between the benefits of size and the benefits of consequences of such size, although there may be no necessary link between the two. Certain outcomes may also be achieved by a small group of, for example, well-connected and influential people, especially in our digital world. Hence, another reason for joining a group—independently of group size—may be the

competence of the group's members, or their connections with certain decision makers. Obviously, we may be able to think of many more reasons for why individuals join groups, and such reasons are arguably context-dependent and influenced by different 'grounds of relevance'. DG's model, however, does not capture these different reasons, nor does it present a more detailed analysis of the context in which their chosen reason for group choice—namely, group size—applies. It is a specific model focused on a particular reason for choice, but it is presented as a general model of group choice. It does not constitute a general model of the processes of *reasoning* and *scrutiny* about that particular reason, which is the concern of liberal cosmopolitans. In that sense, playing a strategic game does not capture *reasoning in the choice of relevant identities*. It is thus somehow curious that DG hold the specific results of their single-reason-based model against the general, normative call of liberal cosmopolitans for reasoning and scrutiny about reasons, as these two endeavours are quite different.

IV. CONTEXT OF CHOICE

In DG's model, people can choose to participate in either one or two groups. But what if we assume that people make group choices across different contexts? We could define a context as the different sets of groups from which one can choose. These sets of groups can be constituted on the basis of different interests, such as professional interests, hobbies, or family activities. Arguably, given a choice among two groups, there may be a context, where I may choose to belong to one group, and another, where I may choose to belong to both groups. For example, if I'm a professional football player, and thereby an important member for my club, but I would also like to play tennis, then, of course, my starting to play tennis imposes costs on my football team. Such costs include having less time to train for my football games or not getting enough sleep to stay in top form for both training programs. As long as I like and enjoy playing both sports, I may indeed have multiple memberships, even if it would be better for my football mates that I dedicated my effort exclusively to football. If I (and my teammates) start suffering from the increase in lost games, I may reconsider and stop playing tennis. Of course, I may have also signed a contract with my football team which does not allow me to play any sport other than football; if this arrangement were good for me—and my team, as well as our fan club—it would be socially efficient. This means that, *in the context of my professional opportunities*,

having a narrow identity and focussing on one particular professional activity makes absolute sense. However, when choosing among leisure activities, I may well choose to belong to a reading club *and* a chess club (and forego playing tennis, even if this choice were also available to me). Thus, by repeating the choice process, as presented by DG, across different contexts with different groups, I may end up with a set of different identities, that is, multiple identities after all. But this is exactly what liberal cosmopolitans claim: choosing one's identity will lead to the recognition of multiple affiliations and attachments. It would be a very special case, and an extreme life-style choice indeed, if someone *continuously* chose one and the same identity across different contexts—it would be interesting to study the conditions under which this kind of 'narrow and exclusive' identity emerges.

V. WHAT IS A NARROW IDENTITY?

Notice that, by definition, a narrow identity in DG's sense is a situation in which everyone joins one group, whereas, in the case of multiple identities, some people may join more than one group (2019, 402). Everyone joining *one and the same* group thus counts as a narrow identity. One may think, however, that this is not quite the definition of narrow identity that liberal cosmopolitans have in mind. If everyone joins one and the same group, and this is socially efficient, then surely liberal cosmopolitans would also support such narrowness. The more compelling case of narrowness in DG's model is, of course, when people choose to belong to different groups, which then implies that agents lack any community. In DG's model, individuals can also choose to belong to any subset of groups, which is a strong assumption that rules out a number of situations where the choice set is restricted, at least for certain people. Indeed, one may think that it is these restrictions that may motivate narrowness because they create or reinforce differences between 'us' (insiders) and 'them' (outsiders).

In summary, it is not quite clear what DG are quarrelling with when referring to 'liberal cosmopolitans'. Of course, their results on the efficiency of narrow identities seem to contradict liberal claims, according to which multiple identities emerge from reasoning about identity. But, at a closer look, there may be no opposition: first, because the meaning of narrow identity (in DG's model and in liberal claims) does not seem to be exactly the same, and second, because by repeating the choice process

across different contexts, it is reasonable to think that multiple affiliations will emerge after all.

VI. IS IDENTITY GROUP MEMBERSHIP?

This leads to a further point. Identity takes part in DG's analysis only as a definition, but it is not explained in the formal choice model as such. We talk about identity here because we *interpret* group choice as identity choice. That is, choosing a particular group makes me that person the group is characteristic of. Joining a football club makes me a footballer. Joining a reading club makes me a reader and book lover. This is a rather simple view of identity, which may apply in some cases (for example, when I am indeed a professional football player, and I like the idea of being seen as a footballer and am presenting myself as such); but it does not in others (for example, I am a member of the local school's parents association, but I don't take that membership to be part of my identity; it's an interest, not something that defines me and that I care to mention when I present myself).

Following Kwame Appiah (2006a, 2006b), DG explicitly use a "stripped-down formulation of social identities" (2019, 398). In brief, Appiah proposes to label groups as a way of distinguishing people who have a group's label from those who don't. This is a helpful way to 'exploit' identity (thus defined) in a formal model and a common way to *describe* people. But is this identity as we understand it when we talk about ourselves? Do we care about identity defined in this way? Would we present ourselves by listing our group memberships? It's a convenient way to describe 'what' the person is, socially speaking, but such a description does not necessarily tell us 'who' the person is—this involves, as liberal cosmopolitans think, a reflection on one's own involvement in groups (Kirman and Teschl 2004).

Hence, if we strip the model down to what it does—namely, explain when it is better to have single membership versus dual or multiple memberships—and leave out any wordy interpretations of narrow or multiple identities, then the paper's claim that it explains why people seek to define "themselves in narrow and exclusive terms", as DG (2019, 414) put it, does not hold. Rather, the model explains why people play only football and not tennis, and when they may do both. It does not explain, for example, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the situation of the Uighurs or Rohingyas, or even the French yellow vest movement, all of which can be seen as social identity conflicts.

The question, therefore, is: what do we really learn by abstracting and simplifying certain realities to a point where the situation becomes mathematically tractable, but the nature of the question (for example, ‘why do people define themselves in narrow terms?’) is reduced to something different (in the given case, to ‘why do people join only one group?’)? Clearly, the model appears refreshingly counterintuitive when framed as a model of identity choice, and it provides interesting food for thought. Yet, I cannot help but wonder two things. First, abstracting is the very essence of mathematical modelling, no quarrels with that. The question is how to interpret the results and, in the given case, whether they are not ‘hyper-interpreted’—that is, whether it is not the case that more is read into them than what is really there. Put yet differently, how do we return from an explicitly “minimalist” (2019, 397) and “lean notion of identity” (396) to real-world identities? Second, if DG think that the model provides any particular tools or insights for analysing the world in a novel and interesting way, it would have been good to make those explicit. So far, we are left with excessively simple examples, such as joining religious congregations and research institutions, which do not really improve our understanding of real-world narrow identities.

Economic decisions are a driving factor of a number of choices; many of them also happen outside any typical market setting. It is always an interesting exercise to look for economic reasoning in non-market decisions. This does not (necessarily) amount to economic imperialism but is constitutive of a real intellectual endeavour, as DG clearly show. But, from this model, we learn when single group memberships are efficient, not why people seek to define themselves through narrow identities. Clearly, the latter topic attracts more attention than the explanation of single group memberships. But that topic is also a substantially more complex issue. Economists are used to simplifying the world. There is nothing wrong in admitting that one is simplifying complexity and in dealing with it in an economic way; but then, one also needs to clearly single out the benefits and limitations of such an economic analysis.

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