

Amartya Sen on Identity and Conflict

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On 14 October 2002, ECAAR Trustee and economics Nobelist Prof. Amartya Sen of Trinity College, University of Cambridge, was awarded an honorary doctoral degree at the University Pierre Mendes-France (UPMF) in Grenoble, France. The festive ceremony - one of those now very rare occasions at which French university officials and professors wear their colorful red and yellow gowns - was attended by about 300 persons, mostly enthralled students, in a standing-room only hall.



Pierre Mendes-France (1907-1982), after whom the venerable university, founded in 1339, is now named, was an opponent of and imprisoned by the Vichy regime. Post-World War II, he became economics minister under Charles de Gaulle in 1945 and then, in 1954, premier after France's defeat at Dienbienphu. At the 1954 Geneva Conference, he arranged the armistice that ended the fighting in Indochina. He also helped bring about the formation of the Western European Union, one precursor to today's European Union.

Prof. Sen and officials acknowledged the long-standing tradition of UPMF in peace and development studies, in the tradition of Mendes-France. Sen's acceptance speech, "Identity and Conflict: Do Civilizations Clash?", is a direct challenge to Samuel Huntington's much discussed 1996 book "The Clash of Civilizations." Sen severely questions the premise of Huntington's thesis, that persons can usefully be classified into "civilizations," and argues that one's willingness to engage Huntington on his terms "provides an automatic endorsement to a deeply misleading way of seeing the people of the world." Moreover, Sen argues that even "many opponents of the Huntington thesis (e.g., 'the West is not battling against the Islamic world') get, in effect, diverted into sharing the same narrow categorization. By accepting the unique importance of that one categorization, even as they question the thesis of a clash, these opponents of civilizational clash can actually contribute to it." Prof. Sen's speech will be published shortly in French and is scheduled to appear in English in the ECAAR Review 2004.

Prof. Sen was introduced by Prof. Jacques Fontanel, vice-president for international affairs at UPMF and chair of ECAAR-France. ECAAR board member Prof. Jurgen Brauer, who had served as liaison between UPMF and Prof. Sen, was also on hand and presented a paper, "On the Production of Peace."

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