It is "an odd presumption," Amartya Sen once observed, that "people of the world can be uniquely characterized according to some singular and overarching system of partitioning."

In "The Undivided Past: Humanity Beyond Our Differences," David Cannadine, a history professor at Princeton and the author of "The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy," insists that the presumption is not only odd but intrinsically wrong, empirically incorrect, and dangerous.

Cannadine acknowledges that tensions and conflicts have arisen across the centuries when people have sought to define themselves, homogeneously, monolithically, and combatively, in one of six categories: religion, race, nation-state, class, gender and civilization. Each of these "totalizing" and "impermeable" categories, he demonstrates, is a fiction, unstable, ambiguous, and even incoherent.

In a sense, Cannadine is knocking down six straw men. Few scholars and intellectuals these days depict "unified collectivities locked in perpetual confrontation and conflict across a great chasm of hatred and an unbridgeable divide of fear."

Nonetheless, "The Undivided Past" is an informative, engaging and timely reminder that the 19th-century notion that races can be identified and ordered has been discredited, and Marx's assertions about class have taken an even harder fall; that relatively few people see faith as the only important facet of their multi-faceted lives or view gender as defining every personal and professional encounter; that only recently -- and in periods of war -- have the claims of the nation become "paramount and overriding" and that "civilizations," which are difficult to define, have been "incapable of acting with unified, coherent and directed purpose."

Cannadine's book is designed to immunize readers from emotional appeals to solidarity as members of one of these collectivities.

After all, as he indicates, less than 20 years ago Samuel Huntington's "The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order" influenced George W. Bush and Tony Blair to frame the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan as struggles between good and evil, Judeo-Christian freedom and democracy and Islamic despotism and tyranny.
Identities, Cannadine emphasizes, are not -- and cannot -- be worn like hats, one at a time.

In the past, and now, the vast majority of people had overlapping loyalties and solidarities that they sustained simultaneously. Nation-states, for example, are almost always multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious, filled with men and women, and not easily slotted into a "civilization."

As the rise and fall of the Soviet Union demonstrated, they can also be newly created, re-established, absorbed into other entities, or ended.

Cannadine concludes, with an optimism that one hopes will be infectious, that if we understand -- and internalize -- the reality of our plural selves we may well be able to see beyond our differences and our identity politics to a common humanity that can bind us together.

-- Glenn C. Altschuler

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