

# Introduction: The Capability Approach and Critical Sociology

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The capability approach was not the brainchild of a sociologist. Amartya Sen is an economist, held in high regard by his peers, and indeed concerned with reconciling economic development with fundamental human rights while remaining faithful to the values of ethical individualism.<sup>1</sup> One might harbor doubts regarding the fruitfulness of such an enterprise for a critical sociology. The purpose of this special issue is to remove the prejudices which may impede a reasoned reception of the capability approach among sociologists who are unsatisfied with the realizations of neoliberalism and orthodox economic science.

From its inception the capability approach was conceived as a multidisciplinary enterprise. In the first instance Amartya Sen sought to hold together economic research and philosophy, as can be seen, among others, in his common work with Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum and Sen, 1993) and his frequent confrontations with political philosophers such as Rawls (Sen, 1990, 2006) and Dworkin (Sen, 2009). For him there is no theory of welfare without political philosophy; no economic theory without moral philosophy; no development studies without a theory of human rights. Following the example of Adam Smith in linking economics and philosophy, he has opened up an area of debate, which transcends disciplinary boundaries and treats them as revisable conventions without, however, obliterating them.

The interdisciplinary capability approach, originating in economics, has in a second step spread to social sciences as a whole (e.g. demography, gender studies, social policies). Like an extensive root system, the capability approach is ramifying and producing new sprouts in sociology. The objective of this special issue of *Critical Sociology* is to demonstrate the wide-ranging possibilities of cross-fertilization between the capability approach and contemporary sociology.

Three specific orientations have guided the conception of this special issue.

An essential asset of the capability approach is how its investigative approach is rooted in an epistemology of evaluation (De Munck and Zimmermann, 2015). This is why this issue firstly

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emphasizes the high relevance of the epistemological debate in sociology. Sticking closely to the capability approach, it aims to show its fruitfulness for sociological debates, particularly when the objective is to develop a critical sociology.

Secondly this issue tries to show the significance of the capability approach for a sociology of inequalities and injustice in the present day. The concept of “conversion factor”, a trademark of the approach, is decisive here. It emphasizes that a fair distribution of resources is not enough to ensure social justice, putting to the fore, both empirically and conceptually, the effect of individual, social and environmental factors on the conversion of resources into achievements and consequently on people’s capabilities. It leads to distinguishing capability from a simple individual aptitude or quality so as to consider it from the perspective of a socially structured agency.

Finally we underscore the new insights which the capability approach brings to a sociology of democracy, both from a theoretical and empirical standpoint. In the last decades, sociology has shed crucial critical light on the actual democratization processes all too often associated with globalization. One might wonder whether there has been any true advance in terms of democracy and human rights in view of the persistence and ongoing production of mechanisms of exploitation and domination of human beings. Dealing with this question requires an important evaluation exercise, for which sociology often lacks the normative yardsticks allowing to clarify its position with respect to pluralism, participation and the importance of public debate. On this score, the capability approach can make an invaluable contribution to the advancement of a critical sociology of democracy.

## Capability as a Meta-Concept

The capability approach performs an essential heuristic function. It directs the scientific inquiry toward questions which are informed by both descriptive and normative agendas. It sets a few general concepts, which are the subject of theoretical elaborations (equality, justice, capacity, resources, etc.) and give direction and purpose to empirical inquiries; the aim being to allow for an appreciation of reality not solely based on facts but on values, making out of the latter the true objects of the inquiry.

This agenda hinges on an epistemology of evaluation considered as a discipline of practical judgment (De Munck and Zimmermann, 2015). Sen is dissatisfied with the deductive and “transcendental” approach of evaluation defended by John Rawls (Sen, 2006). Inspired by a social science approach, Sen’s evaluation theory is much more modest: comparative, pluralist and situated. It rejects the idea of an ultimate foundation and instead encourages empirical and comparative inquiries and promotes democratic deliberation in context. Critical sociology integrates as well evaluative concepts with the aim to gauge justice and injustice, freedom and oppression. If it also accepts pluralism, comparatism and revisability, then a critical sociology might find a source of fruitful inspiration within the capability approach.

Sen has often insisted that the capability approach does not make any claim to completeness. It does not constitute a closed system that would be exclusive of other approaches; on the contrary, it needs to be complemented through a theory of society and a method of inquiry. Incompleteness is a feature that allows combining the capability approach with diverse approaches and concepts, inspired by various epistemologies, according to the subjects under study. One will therefore find within this special issue proposals for hybridizations between the capability approach on the one hand and a qualitative methodology (Zimmermann), the morphogenetic theory (Hvinden and Halvorsen) or an historical approach (Borghi) on the other hand.

The capability approach introduces three considerations that are essential for the epistemology of social sciences.

Firstly the dialogue between disciplines. Economists, sociologists, legal scholars and philosophers can only speak with each other if transversal concepts, elaborated in collaboration, permit different “positional objectivities” (Sen, 1993) to engage in dialogue with and complement one another.

Secondly, as will be seen in this issue, the capability approach fully endorses the epistemological pluralism distinctive of contemporary sociology. At this stage of development of our discipline, we have given up the dream of a grand theory; we recognize the indeterminacy and complexity of social facts, asking for different methodologies and theoretical approaches. As James Bohman says, “even so, there is no reason for skepticism about social sciences, so long as their diversity and purposes are clear” (1991: 234).

Finally, as underscored by Zimmermann, different levels of analysis need to be introduced and combined in any critical study of society. Individual agency, organizations and structures represent different levels of analysis that are mutually complementary and interact with one another.

On this basis the capability approach can stimulate imagination and inventiveness into social sciences. Not in a way where “anything goes” (in line with Feyerabend’s postmodern wish), but as an approach requiring to develop a superior degree of reflexivity above closed disciplinary boundaries or a priori ontologies of the social. As suggested by various articles in this issue, dealing reflexively with pluralism shares in a pragmatist approach to social science; Dewey, Peirce, Habermas and Putnam indicate an epistemological path that is consonant with such a research orientation. In the first part of his article, De Munck distinguishes a number of relevant issues in this respect.

## **Conversion Factors are Factors of Justice**

As a driver of the capability approach, there is not only John Rawls’ normative interrogation as to the proper definition of political equality but other questions which are much closer to those raised by Pierre Bourdieu and his collaborators during the same period, namely: “How can one describe inequalities? How to explain them?” The first question calls for a challenging normative discussion, drawing on the tradition of political philosophy; the second question is a matter of empirical inquiries in economics and sociology.

For Sen, equality is not measured through the distribution of resources – this is at the core of his debate with Rawls (Sen, 1992, 2009) – but instead through capabilities. These depend, beyond persons or their characteristics, on their natural and social environment, which can either facilitate or impede the achievement of objectives by individuals or groups. The generic notion “factors of conversion” designates all the conditions that may influence the transformation of people’s resources into agency and effective achievements. These factors can be subject to an objective empirical diagnosis. The purpose, therefore, is to describe, measure and explain how norms or situational conditions block or foster capabilities. For example, even in the case where women have important economic resources at their disposal, gendered norms may be an obstacle to the mobilization of these resources in diverse contexts, preventing women from thriving in the same way as men (Nussbaum, 2000). Putting conversion factors at the core of the empirical inquiry is not only key to explaining inequalities in development, it also allows producing the kind of knowledge needed to act upon the modification of conversion factors in order to make them more supportive of people’s capabilities.

Sociology emphasizes the necessary interactions between conversion factors, whether they be of an individual, environmental or social nature. This point is developed by all authors of this issue in multiple ways. Three of the papers focus their attention on work relationships; the three others respectively address the practical exercise of public debate, the implementation of human rights, and policies supporting the participation of handicapped persons.

Both Hobson and Zimmermann show the decisive role of corporate policies – in matters of work organization, management and human resources – in shaping workers' capabilities. Consequently they draw attention to the meso scale which lies in-between micro-sociology and macro-sociology, while emphasizing the importance to take all three levels into consideration. With regard to the macro-level, Sen himself has abundantly illustrated its significance, in particular through his contribution to the elaboration of global indicators of development (Stanton, 2007). Within the field of sociology, this echoes the structuration issue addressed by Hvinden and Halvorsen. As for the micro-level, in the words of Hobson, the capability approach allows opening "the black box of choice" and shedding light on the subtle combination of factors underlying a specific and situated choice.

The various contributions to this issue unambiguously demonstrate that the proclamation of an entitlement does not automatically create new opportunities of choice for individuals. Such a proclamation is admittedly important; however, there are other factors which must be taken into account. Among these one must include culture and all those social norms that have an impact on the individual capacity to make use of rights (see De Munck and Hobson in this issue). This is particularly apparent from Hobson's important discussion about the "sense of entitlement" and the "perceived scope of alternatives," which in turn echoes Borghi's reflections on the "capacity to aspire" and imagine a better and different future.

Hvinden, Halvorsen and Hobson rightly insist that it is more appropriate to speak of conversion processes rather than conversion factors, insofar as the evolving configuration of these factors and their interactions are more important than the identification of each of them taken independently. Temporality plays a crucial role in the capability approach. The issue here is not to deny the existence of reproduction and repetition – in short, regularity (the mechanisms of which have been aptly unveiled by sociologists), but rather to integrate the possibility of social change and the emergence of new social phenomena.

## **Deliberation, Human Rights and Informational Basis of Judgment: A Critical Assessment of Democracy**

The capability approach also raises our awareness of democracy – and not solely justice – in contemporary societies. In this volume the issue of democracy is scrutinized from three different and complementary angles.

Firstly, democracy can be considered, politically speaking, as the best possible form of government. All along his career, Sen has investigated the link between public debate and social choices<sup>2</sup>; the capability approach is one of the main outcomes of his reflection in this regard. Bonvin, Laruffa and Rosenstein underscore the interest of investigating both subjects in close interconnection. It namely permits going beyond naïve versions of social choice – those which interpret preferences as an exogenous factor and define interests as purely egoistic motives – so as to develop a much more realistic version of the formation and ongoing transformation of preferences and interests through public debate. Deliberation itself, whose ideal is frequently advocated but whose reality is seldom the object of rigorous study, needs to be considered as a conversion process, through which available information and formal rights to express oneself are transformed into more or less pluralist spaces of discussion and choice, which open more or less extended spaces of opportunities. In this way, the capability approach paves the way toward a critical sociology of democracy.

Secondly, far from being only a political regime, democracy has also a deep-seated social and economic significance. As Sen shows in *Development as Freedom* (1999) and in his work on famines (Sen, 1981), a correlation can be established between the socio-economic development

of a given country and the level of respect for rights. De Munck reminds us that, according to Sen, human rights are not only the instruments but the goals of a democratic society. From this perspective the “second generation” of socio-economic rights or the “third” generation of cultural rights matter as much as the “first” generation of civil and political rights. Such emphasis on the multidimensionality and indivisibility of human rights clearly departs from neoliberalism and its exclusive focus on “first” generation rights. Hobson draws the conclusions of the capability perspective for the welfare state.

Thirdly, democracy also designates a specific way to generate collective knowledge. The normative and empirical conditions of such a democratic production of collective knowledge must be clarified so as to permit an evaluation of real historical situations. Borghi demonstrates how using the complex notion of “informational basis” – which designates the fact that some pieces of information are included in collective knowledge while other data are excluded – may prove fruitful for the empirical analysis of how such collective knowledge is actually produced. He shows how important it is to identify the epistemological and methodological conventions governing the construction of common knowledge, as well as the underlying informational bases and their impact on individual capabilities. The case studies of Zimmermann and Hobson take the same approach.

In the end, the capability approach links social science and politics in a new and suggestive manner. It does not deny the relevance of expert knowledge but declares it radically incomplete and calls for public discussion involving all parties concerned. As highlighted by Zimmermann in the conclusion of her article, this calls for a specific conception of critical sociology, which would equally value the normativity of the scientific observer and the pluralist normativities deployed by the other actors. Indeed, it would bring all these normativities into dialogue without *a priori* privileging a certain vantage point over the others. Ultimately such a critical sociology would remain faithful to the ideal of equality and democracy which guides its conceptual as well as empirical inquiry.

## Notes

1. In responding to the critique of individualism often leveled at the capability approach, Ingrid Robeyns asserts the necessity of distinguishing ethical individualism, which governs the approach, from methodological and ontological individualism, which its detractors generally have in mind when they formulate their critique but which is *not* the approach’s primary thrust. Ethical individualism consists of making people “the unit of moral concern” without, however, reducing the empirical analysis to individuals (Robeyns, 2005: 107); the concern is instead to take into account the effects of political and social organization on individual capabilities.
2. As is illustrated by the title and content of his Nobel Lecture “The Possibility of Social Choice” (8 December 1998).

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