

Symposium on *Development as Freedom* by Amartya Sen

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Collective Capabilities, Culture, and Amartya Sen's *Development as Freedom*

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When Amartya Sen received the Nobel Prize in 1998, the *Wall Street Journal* went ballistic, saying that Sen “was remarkable...only for the extent to which his renown outstripped the quality of his work...” and that “he has done little but give voice to the muddleheaded views of the establishment leftists who dominate his world...” (Pollock 1998). For those familiar with Sen’s work on development, with its genuine affection for the positive effects of markets and generous quotations of Adam Smith, the vitriolic intensity of the attack must have seemed puzzling. To accuse Sen, whose hallmark is clarity and logical elegance, of giving “voice to muddleheaded views” suggests hysteria. What is it about Sen’s ideas that might provoke such hysteria? Using the synthetic and accessible presentation of Sen’s views provided in *Development as Freedom*, I would like to suggest that the *Wall Street Journal*’s defensive intuitions are correct, that Sen does indeed challenge their worldview more profoundly than his admiring invocations of Adam Smith would suggest, and that, therefore, what is frightening about Sen is precisely the clarity and logical elegance of his exposition. At the same time, I would like to argue that the more challenging implications of Sen’s are largely left unexplored in *Development as Freedom* and that exploring them makes the capability approach even more provocative and promising.

The Challenge of the Capability Approach

Development as Freedom’s basic proposition is that we should evaluate development in terms of “the expansion of the ‘capabilities’ of people to lead the

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kind of lives they value—and have reason to value” (18),¹ which is Sen’s definition of freedom. Unlike increases in income, the expansion of people’s “capabilities” depends both on the elimination of oppression and on the provision of facilities like basic education, health care, and social safety nets. Basic education, health care, and women’s rights are themselves constitutive of development. Growth in real output per head is also likely to expand people’s capabilities, especially at lower levels of income, but it cannot be considered, in itself, the ultimate yardstick of development or well-being.

The contribution of the “capabilities approach” lies not only in its role in broadening the core definition of economic development, but also in its effective utilization of Sen’s lifelong efforts to theorize the possibility and necessity of “social choice.”² Discouraged from focusing on social choice by Kenneth Arrow’s brilliant analysis demonstrating the impossibility of consistent social choice results under what seemed like a quite reasonable set of conditions (Arrow 1951, 1963), economists have been understandably leery of emphasizing the importance of political debate and discussion in setting the goals of development.

Sen has attacked this reluctance with impressive effectiveness. First, he has used his skills at formal analysis to argue convincingly that increasing the amount of information taken into consideration in making a decision, for example, allowing even relatively crude interpersonal comparisons of individual utilities, returns social choice to the realm of possibility. Having shown that social choice is possible, he then goes on to suggest that it is necessary. There are two sub-parts to this argument. First, he argues that real incomes are an analytically inadequate metric for making welfare comparisons (79-80), and that the utilitarian efforts to reduce well-being (and therefore the goals of development) to “one homogeneous good thing” (77) (real incomes as a means of satisfying subjective preferences) are equally inadequate.³ He goes on to argue that “there is thus a strong methodological case for emphasizing the need to assign explicitly evaluative weights to different components of quality of life (or of well-being) and then to place the chosen weights for open public discussion and critical scrutiny” (81). Therefore, “we cannot in general take preferences as given independently of public discussion” (153), and “a proper understanding of what economic needs are—their content and their force—requires discussion and exchange” (153).

The upshot of Sen’s argument is also twofold. First, development as the expansion of citizens’ capabilities (i.e., their access and opportunity to do things that they have reason to value) implies a quite different set of allocational decisions and growth strategies than the traditional real-income framework (despite the overlap between them). Second, it implies that choices about those allocations and growth strategies must be “democratic,” not just in the “thin” sense of having leadership succession determined by a regular electoral process, but in the “thick” sense of messy and continuous involvement of the citizenry in the setting of economic priorities. And, this democratic imperative does not flow from the fact that “democracy is *also* a good thing.” It flows from the fact that it is not possible to evaluate economic outputs without such full-fledged discussion and exchange. Small wonder the *Wall Street Journal* is upset.

The *Wall Street Journal* is not, however, nearly as upset as it might be. Despite the radical character of his critique, Sen continues to be a good Manchester liberal. Classic liberal exaltation of the individual and an implicit acceptance of individual (as opposed to social) preferences as exogenous still characterize his work. His analysis focuses on individuals and their relation to an overall social context, not on collectivities as the necessary link between the two. In practice, my ability to choose the life I have reason to value often hangs on the possibility of my acting together with others who have reason to value similar things. Individual capabilities depend on collective capabilities. In fact, as Sen's own formulations about the importance of "public discussion and interchange" imply, the capability of choosing itself may be, in essence, a collective rather than an individual capability. Sen chooses not to explore these implications. Conversely, he also refrains from exploring the ways in which the concentration of economic power over the means of producing and diffusing culture might compromise my capability to decide what things I "have reason to value." Reflecting on questions of collective capabilities and culture makes the capability approach much more threatening to "elite guardians of tradition" (32) like the *Wall Street Journal*.

Collective Capabilities

Gaining the freedom to do the things that we have reason to value is rarely something we can accomplish as individuals. For those already sufficiently privileged to enjoy a full range of capabilities, collective action may seem superfluous to capability, but for the less privileged attaining development as freedom requires collective action. Organized collectivities—unions, political parties, village councils, women's groups, etc.—are fundamental to "people's capabilities to choose the lives they have reason to value." They provide an arena for formulating shared values and preferences, and instruments for pursuing them, even in the face of powerful opposition.

One of Sen's favorite cases, the Indian state of Kerala, offers a useful illustration. Sen highlights Kerala's provision of social services and its ability to transform reproductive attitudes in a non-coercive way, based on "much discussion and debate." What he does not highlight is the extent to which this climate of discussion and debate is built on the foundation of a highly developed set of mobilizing organizations, beginning with political parties and trade unions, and running through the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (People's Science Organization) (see, for example, Heller 1999). These organizational vehicles make the deliberative processes Sen celebrates possible. Fostering the expansion of such means of collective action is central to the expansion of freedom.

As in the case of Sen's other bases for freedom, the opportunity to join peers in collective action is valuable because of its "intrinsic importance" as well as its "instrumental effectiveness...to promote freedoms of other kinds" (xii). Some of the greatest intrinsic satisfactions in life arguably come from social interaction with others who share our interests and values—friends, families, communities, and other groups. These sorts of interactions are not just sources

of “utility,” they are also central to the development of our identities, values, and goals. They are fundamental in our efforts to figure out what we “have reason to value.” At the same time, opportunities for collective action are clearly of instrumental value in securing the other kinds of freedoms that Sen enumerates—from transparency to social opportunities to protective security (see pp. 38-40). Of course, these other freedoms, in turn, enhance possibilities for collective action, but widespread opportunities for collective action cannot be taken for granted even when other freedoms are present.

Democratic elections and civil rights may be prerequisites for politically potent associational life. Naturally occurring forms of associational life—as in families and neighborhoods—may provide a basis for the construction of more purposive organizations. Nonetheless, families and neighborhoods, elections and civil rights—even in societies where basic literacy is widespread—are unlikely to be sufficient in themselves. Dense, diverse, organized collective action is necessary to exploit the opportunities created by elections and civil rights, and complement the dispersed efforts of groups and individuals. Public policy that explicitly acknowledges the importance of collective action, public mores that are open to contestation and collective struggles, and focused efforts to stimulate and sustain organizations that transcend primordial and parochial interests are all necessary components in the quest for development as freedom.

Culture, Social Choice, and Preference Formation

As long as real incomes are presumed to translate unproblematically into well-being via consumption choices, and the question of why people prefer some goods and outcomes over others is firmly defined as “exogenous” to economic analysis, questions of preferences formation belong to some other field of study, connected only tenuously and tangentially to economics. Having abandoned the comfortable safety of this position, the capability approach must deal with the question of culture. Sen is clear that “informed and unregimented *formation* of our values requires openness of communication and arguments” (152), but he does not pursue the question of how distribution of economic power over cultural processes in the modern economy might undermine the processes he advocates.

In his discussion of traditional culture and values, Sen says that preferences and values should not be a question for “the elite guardians of tradition to settle” (32). Suspicious of the pronouncements made by people like Lee Kuan Yew regarding the fixed content of “Asian values” (231-232), he emphasizes the multiple potentialities of all great cultural traditions (232-246) and argues for “people being allowed to decide freely what traditions they wish or do not wish to follow” rather than being forced to “obey the decisions by religious or secular authorities who enforce traditions—real or imagined” (32). He is concerned with modern political restrictions on freedom and is thorough in presenting the negative consequences of dictatorial politics, whether traditional or modern. Likewise, the negative consequences of pre-market forms of economic oppression on capabilities are clearly set out. Laborers working under conditions of bondage or slavery, small cultivators denied access to product

markets, or women prevented from working outside the home are all being prevented from “leading the kind of lives they value—and have reason to value.”

What is missing is an analysis of the extent to which modern market processes might constitute an impediment to the kind of deliberative preference formation that is essential to the expansion of capabilities. While Sen explicitly criticizes the choice-based utilitarianism of economics on grounds that its relation to individual well-being is “is not very robust, since it can be easily swayed by mental conditioning and adaptive attitudes” (62), he does not explore the ways in which influences on “mental conditioning” might systematically reflect the interests of those with greater economic clout and political power. Sen acknowledges that “the sun does not set on the empire of Coca-Cola or MTV” (240), but he doesn’t explore the implications of these kingdoms for the ability of people to choose the kind of lives they “have reason to value.”

The process of preference formation that flows from modern distributions of economic power is the antithesis of the public discussion, argument, and open communication that Sen considers consistent with enhanced capability. Even if we postulate, as Sen implicitly does, a highly rational citizenry, fully capable of assessing what it has reason to value, such a citizenry still depends on access to information in order to evaluate the range of choices available. Contemporary communications technology concentrates and spreads the power to disseminate such information to a degree unimaginable in previous historical periods. One doesn’t need a Foucauldian view of culture in order to appreciate the power of the various “empires of Coca-Cola or MTV” to promote preferences and priorities different from those that arise from individuals autonomously deciding what they “have reason to value.”

While this process may have larger quantitative effects on the consumption patterns of citizens in the rich countries of the North, it is particularly disenfranchising for the citizens of the poor countries of the South, who are Sen’s principal concern. From the point of view of global producers, the promotion of homogeneous tastes and needs across the widest possible range of countries obviously enhances the returns on their productive efforts and, more important, their intangible assets. While their power to homogenize is not unlimited, it is impressively effective. From the point of view of the citizens of Third World countries, a double loss is involved. First, whatever preferences might emerge out of their own experiences and worldviews are unlikely to be reflected in global messages indicating what goods, services, and practices are valuable. Second, as Sen points out, “being relatively poor in a rich community can prevent a person from achieving some relatively elementary ‘functionings’ (such as taking part in the life of the community)” and may affect the “personal resources needed for the fulfillment of self-respect” (71). To the degree that global producers succeed in diffusing what are essentially rich country consumption standards throughout the globe, all but the most affluent citizens of the South become “relatively poor in a rich community”—much poorer than they would need to be if they had more ability to shape consumption standards based on their own experience and resources.

This is a much more subtle kind of “unfreedom” than the grinding poverty and ugly oppression on which Sen rightly concentrates, but it does have real

consequences for people's lives. In the absence of explicit countervailing efforts, it is a form of unfreedom likely to increase rather than decrease with the passage of time. If we should be worried that "the elite guardians of tradition" might subvert people's ability to "choose the lives they have reason to value," we should be even more worried about the power of the "empires of Coca-Cola and MTV" to do the same thing.

Making explicit the contradictions between "development as freedom" and the increasing concentration of power over the production of culture, information, and, therefore, preferences brings us back again to the question of collective capabilities. The most obvious way to establish a counterweight to the unfreedom of the empires of Coca-Cola and MTV is through promotion of a vibrant associational life that enables the less privileged to develop their own distinctive preferences and priorities based on their shared economic positions and life circumstances, and to develop shared strategies for pursuing those preferences.

Conclusion

Sen showed his usual wisdom and astute judgement in keeping his argument carefully focused and, therefore, elegant and compelling. Nonetheless, the understanding and pursuit of "development as freedom" must go beyond the arguments he lays out. As the global political economy moves with ever greater determination toward the implantation of more thoroughly marketized economic relations, analysts must correspondingly focus more closely on how to prevent market-based power inequalities from undermining "development as freedom." Centralization of power over the cultural flows that shape preferences is a more subtle form of "unfreedom" than those which Sen highlights, but no less powerful for being subtle. Institutional strategies for facilitating collective capabilities are as important to the expansion of freedom as sustaining formal electoral institutions. Indeed, without possibilities for collective mobilization formal elections too easily become a hollow farce. Sen's capability approach provides an invaluable analytical and philosophical foundation for those interested in pursuing development as freedom, but it is a foundation that must be built on, not just admired.

Notes

1. All citations from *Development as Freedom* are referred to by page number only.
2. See among his many interventions into the social choice debate, both his Presidential Address to the American Economic Association (Sen 1995) and his Nobel Lecture (Sen 1999).
3. For a cogent statement of the opposing view, see Srinivasan 1994.

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