

Elephants in the Space of Capabilities

(Being the basis for a paper to be presented as part of a Symposium on 'The Capability Approach' at the Annual Conference of the Social Policy Association, Edinburgh, 29 June - 1 July 2009)

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NOTE: I apologise but the following text is not quite the paper promised in the SPA Conference programme. In fact it is a paper I presented at conference, *Closing the Capability Gap - Renegotiating social justice for the young*, May 15-16 2009, Bielefeld University, Germany – under the title '**The Capability Approach: A sufficient foundation for welfare reform?**' The paper draws in turn upon other recent or forthcoming publications by the author, namely Dean, H. (2009) 'Critiquing capabilities: The distractions of a beguiling concept', *Critical Social Policy*, 29 (2); and Dean, H. (2010) *Understanding Human Need*, Bristol: The Policy Press. **It should not be cited or quoted without specific reference to the author. Thank you!** For the purposes of the SPA conference an alternative conclusion will be provided, which will include an extemporised response to the other papers in the proposed Symposium (to be presented by Tania Burchardt and Rod Hick, respectively).

ABSTRACT

As a foundation for welfare reform the advantage of the capability approach over, for example, the social inclusion approach is that it is concerned with the freedom of the individual to meet her needs as she might choose as opposed to the opportunities she has to access such resources as she is assumed to need. It is an advance upon other liberal approaches to social justice. But as a liberal approach it suffers nonetheless from three limitations in its understanding of human need. First, it does not question the extent to which the meeting of needs under capitalism rests upon the exploitation of human labour. Second, it implicitly invalidates the extent to which human needs can only be satisfied in the context of human interdependency. Third, it neglects the importance of parity of participation in the processes by which we name and claim our needs.

Such limitations have been addressed only in theory. Marx has argued that humanity's ultimate potential amounted to a 'radical need', denied to us by capitalism but realisable through revolutionary action. Some feminists argue that need is best addressed through a care-based, not a rights-based ethic, while some ecologists argue for a 'back to the future' approach and for reverting to 'convivial', yet sustainable, modes of needs satisfaction. Finally, Nancy Fraser has argued for a 'politics of needs interpretation' in which the privately experienced needs of the oppressed and marginalised could be projected into the public sphere.

The paper will argue that a strategic application of the capability approach might acknowledge the limitations described. In particular, it should resist the tendency for the capability approach to degenerate into a human capital approach (that seeks to develop young people's future productivity rather than their personalities). It should be mindful that human beings can never be wholly autonomous, but must achieve their unique identities through interaction with others (so education, for example, should be understood as a dialogical pedagogical process). It should acknowledge that the processes of public reasoning by which societies determine the capabilities acknowledged to be 'valuable' have to be radically inclusive in a way that existing liberal democracies are not (so ways must be found for the authentic voices of young people to be heard).

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This paper argues that as a potential foundation for welfare reform the capabilities approach has advantages over the social inclusion approach, but that it exhibits nonetheless the weaknesses of a liberal-individualist approach. These weaknesses are discussed and in relation to each, radical alternatives are suggested, elements of which, it is suggested, might inform a critical, but strategic, application of the capabilities approach.

Social inclusion versus human capabilities

The concept of capabilities associated with Nobel laureate, Amartya Sen, has played a significant role in debates about social development in the global South - not least upon the framing of the Millennium Development Goals (United Nations Development Programme, 2003; United Nations General Assembly, 2000), but it has had rather less impact in debates about welfare reform in the global North. At the European level, the capabilities concept has provided a focus for debate under the auspices of the CAPRIGHT (*Resources Rights and Capabilities: In search of social foundations for Europe*) integrated project of the EU Sixth Framework programme (and see, for example, Salais & Villeneuve, 2004). Much of that debate, however, appears to have been focussed rather narrowly on issues of labour market activation. In Europe, perhaps, the dominant concept in social policy in recent years has been that of social exclusion, or rather its obverse, *social inclusion*.

A pledge to fight social exclusion had been incorporated as long ago as 1977 in the Amsterdam Treaty, and found expression during the 1980s through the *European Social Agenda* (European Commission, 1994). The term 'social exclusion' was accepted into policy making discourse in the UK in the 1990s, initially as a synonym for 'poverty' (Burchardt, Le Grand, & Piachaud, 2002), but more particularly under the 'New' Labour government that assumed control in 1997 as a 'short hand label' for a range of intractable social problems that were to be addressed by a new cross-departmental Social Exclusion Unit (Social Exclusion Unit, 1997). By the year 2000, the Lisbon European Council was ready to announce the European Union Social Inclusion Strategy, which pledged to eradicate poverty in Europe by 2010. To this end, priority was given to the development of 'a competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy' across the whole of Europe, with priority given to maximising labour market participation, but with attention also given to the risks faced by the most vulnerable social groups (Marlier, Atkinson, Cantillon, & Nolan, 2007). The Social Inclusion Strategy is widely regarded as the central component of EU social policy, through which the policies and the outcomes of member states are periodically monitored.

As a foundation for welfare reform, the social inclusion approach starts from the premise that the causes of poverty and the obstacles to maximum economic performance lie in the exclusion experienced by some people from such resources and opportunities as they are assumed to need. The capabilities approach by contrast is concerned with the freedom of the individual to meet her needs as she might choose. Certainly, the concept of social exclusion, invites us to consider not only from what people are excluded, but

who does the excluding (e.g. Barry, 2002). But there is a deeper question: if people were truly free to live as they would wish, how might they define and fulfil their needs? For Amartya Sen what matters is not equality or inequality of resources or outcomes, but of what he calls 'capabilities'. Poverty is primarily a deprivation of human capabilities (Sen, 1985, 1992, 1999, 2005).

Capabilities are more than mere opportunities. The term refers to a person's capacity to choose and to act. Nor are capabilities the same as abilities. The term refers not to what people are able to do, but to their freedom to lead the kind of lives they value, and have reason to value. The problem Sen addresses is that of how we as human beings are able to convert 'commodities' (goods, services and other resources) into 'functionings' (the valuable activities that, through what we can be and do characterise our humanity). Between the space of commodities and the space of functionings lies the space of capabilities and it is within that space that, according to Sen, the most essential of human needs may be defined.

The advantages of the capabilities approach

The capabilities approach is important, not least because it appears elegantly to transcend the distinction between absolute and relative needs.

Sen's contention is that while poverty may be relative in the space of commodities, it is always absolute in the space of capabilities. Equal resources do not necessarily give rise to equal achievements because people are not necessarily free to live as they might wish. The utility of commodities and the well-being to be obtained from their resultant functionings are determined or mediated by a host of intervening socio-economic, cultural, historical, geographical and climatic factors; but human capability is an absolute imperative. The specific distinction between absolute and relative poverty was debated between Sen and Townsend in the 1980s (see Townsend, 1993 for a reprise). Sen claimed that Townsend's concept of relative deprivation conflated poverty with inequality. Townsend claimed that Sen's insistence on identifying an 'absolutist core' of poverty perpetuated a narrow subsistence-standard conception of poverty. Neither claim stands up, but the debate is instructive. Townsend, whose work has been critically important to the scientific measurement of poverty, was seeking to define the point at which 'relative' deprivation leads to a person's objective exclusion from social participation. Sen, rather as Adam Smith had done (1776: 691), was seeking to identify the circumstances in which a person is 'absolutely' deprived of the ability to function 'without shame'. Both Sen and Townsend recognised the social nature of needs, but were adopting different understandings of 'absolute' and 'relative'. What is distinctive about Sen's capabilities approach is that it attempts to provide a single all subsuming criterion of need: namely, whether a human being is substantively free to live as she would choose. As such, it offers an advance on other progressive liberal stances (e.g. Rawls, 1972) which advocate an equal opportunities approach on the one hand and a positive rights approach to basic necessities on the other. The capabilities approach, by focusing on the substantive freedom of the individual to do or to be that which she values, is better able to accommodate the diversity of human beings and the complexity of their circumstances (see Burchardt, 2006).

The drawbacks of the capabilities approach

Despite its advantages, the capabilities concept has its own inherent limitations. Capability remains, fundamentally, an abstract liberal-individualist concept. It is possible to outline three potential criticisms.

- First, it does not question the extent to which the meeting of needs under capitalism rests upon the exploitation of human labour.
- Second, it implicitly invalidates the extent to which human needs can only be satisfied in the context of human interdependency.
- Third, it neglects the importance of parity of participation in the processes by which we name and claim our needs.

The first of these criticisms relates to the silence of the capabilities approach regarding the systemic impediments to human freedom that are associated with capitalism. Sen is clear that hunger and poverty result from human not natural failures (1999) but he is not a critic of the capitalist mode of production. It may be argued that insofar as the capabilities approach would promote 'truly human functioning' (Nussbaum, 2006: 85) it fits with the Marxist idea that work is constitutive of our 'species being' (Marx, 1844: 328) (and see Markus, 1978: 37-41). But the capability approach clearly departs from the understanding of capitalism to be found in Marx's later writings (Marx, 1887) and is silent regarding the extent to which wage labour - as the dominant form that work takes under capitalism - may alienate us from our social humanity. The implication of the capabilities approach appears to be that human development and capitalist economic development are - potentially, at least - commensurable.

Whereas Marx's vision of communism was of a society in which there would be a unity of humanity and nature, Malcolm Bull (2007) has suggested that the capabilities approach has an equivalent vision of a path to human development, albeit one in which 'moving from bare capability to fully human functioning' will not necessarily be universal. Sen (1999: 6) is anxious to defend the principles of free and fair market exchange, and markets for the exchange of goods and services clearly can serve human ends. The Marxist objection is that a market-driven economy necessarily violates the principles of social justice because under capitalism people 'do not have equal access to advantage' (Callinicos, 2003: 117). On the one hand, necessary and valuable functionings such as caring for children or for disabled relatives, studying, voluntary work or community participation have no marketable value and are not rewarded by the market (e.g. Mooney, 2004). On the other, the global market economy though it may not in any obviously sense constrain the capabilities of the comfortable middle classes of the global North, it can compromise them, since our ability to function as we choose may necessarily be achieved at the expense of others' freedom - sometimes in distant parts of the world.

Defenders of the capability approach will argue that it acknowledges the 'value' of functionings that are not marketable. Nussbaum's list of central human functional capabilities includes, for example, 'Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think and reason to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities' (2000b: 79-78). Once again, however, the individual is constructed as an abstract bearer of freedoms and the

capabilities that should ideally flow from these. The capability approach may demand substantive freedoms to choose, and offer an uplifting vision of what valuable capabilities might consist of, but it is an approach that must be accommodated with the imperatives of the market economy. Peter Townsend's original objection to the capabilities concept (see above) reflected a fear that it could be used to justify a minimalist rather than an expansive conception of human need. The objection may not have done justice to the logic of Sen's arguments, but the fear it reflected remains legitimate since there is nothing in the capabilities concept itself to challenge the ways in which a capitalist market economy can drive inequalities and impair as much as provide for the satisfaction of human need.

The second objection to the capabilities approach lies in the fact that its liberal foundations frame the individual as an independent entity. Individualistic responses to human need tend to 'problematise' dependency: that is they tend to regard the person as if axiomatically she were an individual actor functioning independently from others on life's stage; as an isolated atom unaffected by the gravitational forces of other particles or bodies around her. As a consequence, liberal attitudes tend towards ambiguity towards the ways in which people depend on each other. They find certain kinds of dependency (such as 'free-riding') morally objectionable, but perversely regard the dependency of individuals upon their employers for the means of subsistence or upon their families for everyday care as a form of 'independence'. Independence is equated, or rather conflated, with self-sufficiency. Contemporary Western societies are so imbued with the individualistic ethic that they become strangely blind to human interdependency, despite the inevitable dependencies associated with different stages of the human life-course and despite the extensive social interactions that are essential to human survival. There is a tendency for people to condemn dependency on the part of others and to deny that they are themselves dependent; albeit that - paradoxically - they may celebrate their own *dependability*, especially for loved ones, neighbours or friends (Dean & Rodgers, 2004; Dean & Taylor-Gooby, 1992).

The consequences of this for the capability approach have been identified by Deneulin and Stewart (2000), who contend that social structures matter not only because they may enable or constrain what Sen calls 'capabilities', but because they are constitutive of our individual identities and the frameworks of meaning by which we value what Sen calls 'functionings'. A social being cannot wholly be free from others because the terms on which she belongs within a family, a community or a society will matter as much as her freedom to do or to be. Feminist supporters of the capability approach, in fairness, do not necessarily focus exclusively on the self-sufficient individual subject. For example, Nussbaum in her list of central human functional capabilities includes 'affiliation', which encompasses 'being able to live with and towards others' (2000b: 79). She is clearly mindful of people's 'need for care in times of extreme dependency' (2000a: 48) and that being wholly dependent on another need not subvert one's moral personality. To this end, she argues, the goal should be to create 'a space' within which even the most impaired and dependent individual can give and receive love and respect. In her list of central human capabilities, therefore, Nussbaum stipulates that a person should 'be able to imagine the situation of another and have compassion for that situation' (2000b: 79). However, it seems that both the person and 'the other' are constituted as the abstract bearers of capabilities, not as what Selma Sevenhuijsen, for

example, would term 'selves-in-relationship' (2000: 10). To be capable of 'imagination' and 'compassion' for the situation of another implies disconnection as a starting point, not a substantive connection. The person and 'the other' interact in a metaphorical 'space of capabilities'. Human identity or moral personality depend in a very immediate and substantive sense upon human association. In the final analysis an autonomous self existing within an abstract space of capabilities must remain a conceptual illusion. Insofar as our humanity defines us it places boundaries on our freedoms.

The third objection to the capabilities approach is that just as the space of capabilities remains a metaphorical abstraction, so too must the forum of public deliberation in which we might agree what our capabilities should be. Sen has acknowledged the role that 'public reasoning' must play in evolving definitions of capabilities (2005). The capabilities concept rests on the idea that there are things to do and be that the individual values and has reason to value. By implication, the individual must have 'good' reason to value such things. But who determines what constitutes good reason? How can recognition be afforded to the value that people may place on them? Such judgements are necessarily contingent and relative. If the capabilities concept is to inform public policy the liberal ideal requires that there should be a public forum in which to deliberate upon the things we should value and to operationalise our capabilities. In the ancient democracies of Athens and Rome the public forum was quite literally a venue for debate. In modern liberal thought it is a metaphorical realm. Habermas (1962) has argued that the public realm as a liberal ideal justifies a social order in which the state is supposedly disengaged from the functioning of a 'free' market, yet made accountable before the metaphorical court of public opinion.

Sen himself has been reluctant to engage in the listing of essential capabilities. Certain of his followers (Nussbaum (2000b), Alkire (2002) and Burchardt and Vizard (2007)), however, insist that by public deliberative processes it is possible to determine what a list of central human capabilities should look like. Indeed, they include participation in public deliberation as a core capability. Nussbaum's list of central human functional capabilities includes 'Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life' (2000b: 80). Yet, some would claim that we are witnessing a 'dissolution' of the public realm (J. Clarke, 2004). Even the most 'democratic' consensual agreements achieved in the process of public deliberation - through public consultations, citizens' juries, participative poverty assessments or focus groups - may elide fundamental social conflicts and hidden forms of oppression. Such deliberative processes seldom if ever achieve effective 'parity of participation' (Fraser, 1997). They may do nothing more than reflect prevailing hegemonic assumptions about what kind of a life any of us should value and what kinds of need should therefore be recognised.

For these reasons, though the capabilities approach might provide an alternative foundation for social policy to that currently provided in Europe by the social inclusion approach, it is not I would argue a sufficient foundation.

Radical alternatives?

Is it therefore possible to envisage an alternative approach? I can suggest three candidates, each of which - albeit only in theory - might address the objections to the capability approach that I have outlined above:

- First, the acquiescence of the capabilities approach to capitalism's exploitative potential may be countered through a social policy founded on a Marxian 'politics of need'.
- Second, the ambivalence of the capabilities approach to the realities of human interdependency may be countered through social policy founded on a feminist ethic of care approach and/or an ecologically informed 'convivial sustainability' approach.
- Third, the inability of the capabilities approach to achieve effective public deliberation of needs claims may be countered through a social policy founded on what Nancy Fraser has termed a 'politics of needs interpretation' (Fraser, 1997).

Marx had advanced a concept of 'radical' needs; an elusive yet pertinent notion that Agnes Heller has sought to capture. Radical need can be defined as the expression of humanity's ultimate potential; something that is denied to us by capitalism and can only be realised through revolutionary action. Human beings need to work, but in the sense that they should be free to perform labour for its own sake; they need free time, in the sense that they should be free to be truly human; they need universality, in the sense that they should be universally free to develop as individuals (Heller, 1974: 88-95). Central to the Marxist project is the concept of praxis: the synthesis between theory and action. The theory of which Marx spoke 'is actualised in a people only insofar as it actualises their needs ... A deep-going revolution can only be a revolution in basic needs' (cited in Heller, 1974: 89). The satisfaction of radical needs, therefore, requires the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism.

One and a quarter centuries since Marx's demise we might suppose that the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism is now a forlorn hope. Nonetheless, Kate Soper (1981) has attempted to address what a 'politics of need' might consist of. At the heart of Marxist theory lies the distinction between use value and exchange value. In a capitalist society we observe the relationships between the goods we consume and between the different sorts of work we perform not so much in terms of the extent to which they satisfy our needs, as in terms of notions of their relative value as commodities. Marx's celebrated aphorism - 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his need' (cited by Soper, 1981: 188) - was an attempt to imagine a society without commodities; in which need would replace value as the measure of things; in which work would be an expression of our species being and not an exchange of labour power. Marx had contended that 'only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois rights be crossed in its entirety' (see Soper, 1981: 188). His point was that the basis of rights under capitalism lies in the ownership and exchange of commodities. If human society were organised with a view to satisfying universal need, we would have no need of rights; at least not the kind of citizenship based rights associated with capitalist liberal democracies.

To digress for a moment (since this was never a part of Marx's argument) might we yet conceive of some utopian form of cosmopolitan citizenship (Held, 1995) or 'deep' citizenship (P. Clarke, 1996) in which social rights and human needs become increasingly synonymous? And, in any event, rights could presumably still provide a necessary discursive resource in the event of an evolutionary as opposed to a revolutionary transition to socialism. Such a transition, according to Soper, requires a politics that seeks to plan for the meeting of needs. Soper argues that a society that reads its needs from

what it consumes is evading the question of needs (1981:215-216). The implication here is that the capitalist welfare state did not and does not go far enough in addressing human need. A politics of needs entails decisions about what is needed and this requires *information* upon which to base such decisions and mechanisms for social *participation* in the making of those decisions (1981: 210-211).

Our second alternative has two distinct but not necessarily incompatible strands. One of these stems from the feminist ethic of care debate which began with Carol Gilligan's (1982) claim that feminine moral codes of care are consistently subordinated to masculine codes of moral reasoning (see, for example, Ellis, 2004). Moral codes of care, she contended, are rooted in mutual responsibility and relationships, not rights and rules; in everyday reality, not abstract principles of justice and equality. Subsequent commentators (Clement, 1998; Friedman, 1993) expressed concern that in attempting to re-valorise an ethic of care one should not omit to embrace the interdependency of strangers as well as intimates. Principles of justice and equality are necessary if we are to have rights and rules by which to accord recognition and respect to distant others. Nonetheless, individuals can only exist through and with others within networks of care (Sevenhuijsen, 1998; Tronto, 1994). The meeting of human needs depends not just on how societies organise their means of production, but also how its members care for and about each other (Kittay et al, 2005; Parker, 1981). The insight is not necessarily new since it resonates with the premises of *Ubuntu*, the ancient pan-African philosophy (Ramose, 2003). Nonetheless it reminds us of the concrete substance of human lives in which everyday relationships can entail conflict, negotiation and struggle. The ways in which we care for and about each other are, as often as not, socially negotiated within such relationships, across the generations and over time (e.g. Finch & Mason, 1993). Substantive relations of care must be negotiated on the basis of mutual recognition between needy subjects with shared vulnerabilities. The task, as Fiona Williams has put it 'is less one of arguing against autonomy as a liberal concept than one of redefining the concept of autonomy to fit with a notion of interdependence' (2001: 481).

The other strand to the second alternative is to be found in the work of thinkers, such as Freire (1972) and Illich (1977), whose writings continue to inform critical social ecological thinking. Illich's approach, for example, grew out of his own account of 'the history of needs'. Illich railed on the one hand against the way in which advanced industrial societies - both capitalist and communist - either manufactured or imputed the needs of their citizens; on the other against the way in which modern professionals dictate and disable their clients' understanding of needs.

... life without addictive access to commodities is rendered either impossible or criminal. Making do without consumption becomes impossible, not just for the average consumer but even for the poor. All forms of welfare ... are of no help. The liberty to design and craft one's own distinctive dwelling is abolished in favor of the bureaucratic provision of standardized housing ... The organization of employment, skills, building resources, rules, and credit favor shelter as a commodity rather than as an activity. Whether the product is provided by an entrepreneur or an apparatchik, the effective result is the same: citizen impotence, our specifically modern experience of poverty. (Illich, 1977: vii-ix)

The need for housing, employment, healthcare and education is fashioned by market forces, state planning and/or the ministrations of professionals. The way forward,

according to Illich, is to revert to a form of 'convivial austerity', the object of which would be 'to protect personal use value against disabling enrichment'(1977: 16). It is a 'back to the future' prescription that is consonant, for example, with claims by ecologists that 'demand must be reduced, not expanded' (Porritt, 1984: 136) or with Jordan's (2008) aim of restoring the notion of 'social value' to the public policy making process (see Chapter Six above). More fundamentally, however, a social policy approach based on what Illich calls conviviality would require new tools by which to reclaim the practical knowledge that would empower ordinary people to name and claim their own needs (Illich, 1971, 1973) (and cf. Freire, 1972). Illich's is an essentially anarchistic and romantic quest. Elements of his analysis, however, - especially his assertion that 'needs have become almost exclusively coterminous with commodities' (1977: 13) - are strongly redolent of Marxist thinking, albeit that Marx sought not to retreat from the effects of capitalist modernity, but to transcend it. Other elements of the analysis are consonant with an ethic of care approach, since the emphasis is on valorising the quotidian foundations of our human interdependency.

In many ways, our third alternative, though still quite abstractly conceived, brings together and breaths additional life into each of the other two. Nancy Fraser's 'politics of need interpretation', I believe, provides a glimpse of how Soper's 'politics of need' might be combined with feminised and 'convivial' forms of participation in order to provide an effective foundation for welfare reform. Fraser starts from the premise that 'in late capitalist welfare state societies, talk about people's needs is an important species of political discourse' (1989: 161). She proceeds to explore the ways in which needs are discursively interpreted and communicated. In doing so, she adopts what she later comes to defend as a pragmatic approach to the study of discourse and communicative action (see Fraser, 1997: ch. 6). The resulting account provides a distinctive perspective on social policy.

Fraser (1989: ch. 8) identifies three culturally constructed spheres of life or enclaves: the political, the economic and the domestic. She argues that for needs talk to enter the political sphere, it must be 'publicised'; projected from the private sphere of commodities and market relations on the one hand and family and personal relations on the other into the public forum of political debate. Everyday livelihoods and personal needs are political, but private: a politics of needs interpretation might serve to democratise them. Social policy theorists, such as Esping-Andersen (1999), have discussed the extent to which capitalist welfare states may both 'decommodify' and 'defamilialise' (or may subsequently 'recommodify' and 'refamilialise') their citizens and/or the means by which the needs of citizens are met. Fraser discusses converse processes by which certain kinds of needs and needs talk can remain systemically depoliticised and confined to the economic or domestic spheres. But she also points to the circumstances in which the 'runaway needs' of, for example, exploited migrant workers or physically abused women can on occasions leak out of their enclaves and become politicised through 'oppositional' forms of discourse. Oppositional discourses may be met with 'reprivatisation' discourses that seek to '(re)depoliticise' such needs. In addition to oppositional and reprivatisation discourses, Fraser identifies a third kind of needs discourse; 'expert' discourses. These are the discourses of the professional problem solvers who, as 'the politics of needs interpretation devolves into the administration of needs satisfaction' (1989: 177), seek to colonise the definition of needs . Fraser's

argument here is strikingly similar to that of Illich (see above). The implication is that a more effective and enduring politics of needs interpretation might require, as Illich and Soper each suggest, some means for the democratisation of information and of expert knowledge.

However, Fraser acknowledges two unresolved issues. First, how are we to decide between competing needs claims? This, she says, must involve 'balancing democracy and equality' (1989: 182). In later essays (1997: chs. 1 and 3), she casts more light on what this might mean. In her critique of the liberal democratic public sphere she calls for 'parity of participation': for steps to ensure that silent and oppressed groups or 'publics' should be enabled to access the political sphere on equal terms with more vocal and powerful publics. Fundamentally connected with this call is a wider demand that a politics of recognition should go hand in hand with a politics of redistribution (Fraser & Honneth, 2003). A politics of need interpretation must recognise and include everybody's claims in order to negotiate a just distribution of resources. The intention here would seem to go some way to fulfilling Soper's participation requirement.

The second unresolved issue is the relationship between needs claims and rights. We have seen both in this chapter and the last that this is an ambiguous and contested relationship. Fraser for her part decides to align herself 'with those who favour translating justified needs into social rights' (1989: 183).

Conclusion

I have argued elsewhere that a discourse of social rights provides a more immediate strategic terrain for a politics of needs interpretation than a discourse of capabilities. Capabilities are construed at one stage removed from the context in which social rights are in practice negotiated (Dean, 2009). The strengths and limitations of a rights-based approach are well understood (e.g. Dean, 2002). Nonetheless, bearing in mind the theme of this conference, I would acknowledge that the capability approach is, potentially, another strategic vehicle through which to contend for welfare reform, provided the reservations I have expressed can be addressed.

Accordingly, it is first necessary to resist the tendency for the capability approach to degenerate into a human capital approach. Sen, in fairness, has remarked upon the limitations of the term human capital on the grounds that 'human beings are not merely means of production, but also the end of the exercise' (1999: 296). Though it may have an application within critical sociological analysis (e.g. Bordieu, 1997), as a metaphor in policy discourse the concept of human capital takes on a distinctly reductive economic meaning: individuals are constituted as actual or potential *economic* actors. It is clear nonetheless that many of those who purport to have adopted the idea of human capabilities regard the term, implicitly or explicitly, as a synonym, for human capital². This is a particular hazard in the case of debates about labour market activation or 'welfare-to-work'. The function that may be claimed for social policy is that ameliorates the diswelfares of a capitalist market economy (Titmuss, 1974): it partially at least de-commodifies the wage labourer (Esping-Andersen, 1990) and preserves her/him from

² In the context of this particular conference, I shall avoid confrontation and refrain from citing specific examples. However, clear instances may readily be found at a supra-European level in the publications of the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme.

unfettered exploitation. Human beings - whether young or adult - are not capital, any more than they are commodities. The object of both training and education systems should be to develop people's personalities, not their future productivity: to enable them to fulfil themselves, not to exploit their potential. Can the capabilities approach promote this argument without ambiguity?

Second, any strategic application of the capabilities approach must be mindful that human beings can never be wholly autonomous, but must achieve their unique identities through interaction with others. The task claimed by Fiona Williams for a new political ethics of care 'is less one of arguing against autonomy as a liberal concept than one of redefining the concept of autonomy to fit with a notion of interdependence' (2001: 481). The same, I would suggest applies for the concept of capabilities. Similarly, if the capabilities approach were to open itself to the idea of 'convivial sustainability' (a term I have coined in an attempt to combine the visions of Illich and Freire), then the basis of human capabilities could be apprehended less in the context of individualised competitiveness and more in the context of collaborative self-empowerment. This is especially relevant in the sphere of education policy. Freire (1972), in particular, argued that education should be constituted as an essentially dialogical and liberating pedagogical process. I am not sure, but I wonder whether this is an idea that might help ground the capabilities concept in specific form of every day practice.

Finally, I believe, a strategic application of the capabilities approach should acknowledge that the processes of public reasoning by which societies determine the capabilities acknowledged to be 'valuable' have to be radically inclusive in a way that existing liberal democracies are not. The abstract nature of the capabilities concept does not readily lend itself to a popular politics of needs interpretation. Supporters of the capabilities approach must nonetheless find ways to link private space of capabilities to the public space of political deliberation. Thinking specifically about young people, ways must be found for their authentic voices to be heard; for their understanding of capabilities to be articulated. This, I suspect, is the biggest challenge faced by the capabilities approach.

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