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Critiquing capabilities: The distractions of a beguiling concept

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Abstract:

The article provides a critique of the concept of 'capabilities', initially advanced by Amartya Sen. The concept has directly influenced the workings of both the international United Nations Development Programme and the UK's domestic Equality and Human Rights Commission. It is argued that it is essentially a liberal-individualist concept. Despite its attractions - which the article acknowledges - the 'capability approach' obscures or neglects three key realities: the constitutive nature of human interdependency; the problematic nature of the public realm; and the exploitative nature of capitalism. The article argues for an emancipatory politics of needs interpretation that would be better served by a discourse of rights than a discourse of capabilities.

Key words: *exploitation; interdependency; needs; public realm; rights*

The 'elephant in the room' metaphor (which alludes to a problem so large and obvious that everybody pretends not to notice it) is admittedly facile and overworked. But it is quite apt when it comes to reminding ourselves of certain key issues that remain perennially neglected by the increasingly influential concept of 'capabilities', as originally developed by Amartya Sen (Sen, 1985, 1999, 2005). I want to suggest that there are (at least) three elephants in what Sen has called 'the space of capabilities': three issues from which the beguiling notion of capabilities seems to distract attention. Despite its heuristic value, the foundations of the capabilities concept are essentially liberal. It therefore elides the fundamental and inherent contradictions of capitalism. This article will briefly outline the capabilities concept. It will explore its influence - for example, upon the thinking of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and, most recently, the UK's Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), before developing a critique that will touch upon the way in which the concept and its supporters have ignored or attempted to sideline three key issues: the realities of human interdependency; the hegemonic liberal conception of the public realm; and the extent to which capitalism's global reach is predicated upon exploitative relations of power. The article concludes by arguing that the

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capabilities concept distracts from rather than assists the struggle to name and claim our human needs.

The concept

The capabilities approach has been important in debates about the nature of social inequality and relative poverty. Sen's argument is that inequalities of income and outcome are less important than equality of fundamental freedoms. He has redefined poverty as an objective curtailment of a person's 'capabilities'; of her capacity and freedom to choose and to act. Capabilities are not the same as abilities. The term refers not simply to what people are able to do but to their freedom to lead the kind of lives they value, and have reason to value.

Sen distinguishes between capabilities and:

- On the one hand, commodities (that is, the goods, services or other resources to which people have access) and the essential characteristics of those commodities (that is, the properties which define their purpose or utility).
- And on the other hand, functionings (that is, the full range of activities – including productive, re-productive, caring, expressive and deliberative kinds of functioning that human beings may achieve) and the subjective 'end states' (that is, the happiness or sense of well-being that are the final outcome of those functionings).

Capabilities, therefore, represent the essential fulcrum between material resources and human achievements². While poverty may be relative in the space of commodities, it is always absolute in the sphere of capabilities. Sen's argument has been that equal inputs do not necessarily give rise to equal outputs because human capabilities – the real freedoms that people have to fashion their own way of living – may be objectively constrained (cf. Held, 1994; Walzer, 1983). The substantive utility of particular commodities and the well-being that results from particular kinds of functioning are determined or mediated by a host of socio-economic, cultural, historical, geographical and climatic factors. The principal advantages of the concept are twofold.

- First, it transcends the distinction between absolute and relative needs. The well-worn distinction between absolute and relative concepts of poverty was famously debated between Sen and Peter Townsend in the 1980s (see Townsend, 1993 for a reprise) (and for a helpful overview Lister, 2004). While Sen claimed that Townsend's relative approach conflated poverty and inequality, Townsend claimed that Sen's insistence on identifying an 'absolutist core' of poverty perpetuated a narrow subsistence-standard conception of poverty. In truth neither claim stands up. Townsend was seeking objectively to define the point at which 'relative' deprivation leads to a person's inability to participate in society. Sen was seeking to describe the circumstances in

² The author has advanced this definition elsewhere, albeit in a more specific context: see Dean, H., Bonvin, J-M., Vielle, P. and Farvaque, N. (2005) 'Developing capabilities and rights in welfare-to-work policies', *European Societies*, 7(1), 3-26.

which a person is 'absolutely' deprived of the ability to function (to do and to be) without shame. They both recognised the social nature of needs, but were adopting different understandings of 'absolute' and 'relative'. It has been argued that the distinction between absolute and relative needs reflects more complex distinctions that may be drawn between inherent and interpreted notions of human need (e.g. Dean, 2002). Psychological theories of need envisage that the human individual possesses a bundle of inherent needs, ranging from base pleasures to higher forms of self-fulfilment (Maslow, 1943; Ryan & Deci, 2001). Other commentators (e.g. Bradshaw, 1972) regard human need as a matter of interpretation: its nature depends upon by whom, the criteria by which and the context in which it is defined. In contrast, however, the capabilities approach provides a single all subsuming criterion of need: namely, whether a human being is substantively free to live as she would choose.

- Second, it is an advance on Rawlsian concepts of social justice. Prior to the capability approach, Rawls' theory of social justice (1972) had offered the most progressive approach from within a liberal perspective, since it had sought to combine negative principles of liberty with meritocratic notions of equal opportunity and positive rights to 'primary goods': it was a theory, however, that expressly permitted social inequalities insofar as they could be justified in terms of the benefits they might bestow upon the least well endowed. 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).

Capability is at one level a neo-Aristotelian concept. It is an idea that, potentially, captures the notion of eudaimonic wellbeing and the 'good life' that is to be found in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Eudemian Ethics* (see Macintyre, 2007). It is a concept that transcends a narrow hedonic and utilitarian calculus in order to embrace the essential 'virtues' that, morally, define humanity. Yet capability remains a post-Enlightenment liberal concept. It is an idea within the tradition of Roosevelt's (1944) four freedoms speech in which - amongst other things - he asserted that 'a necessitous man is not a free man'. The elusiveness of the concept has not been aided by Sen's own reluctance specifically to list or to prioritise what might constitute 'capabilities' (2005). Unsurprisingly, therefore, it is a concept whose influence has been extraordinarily diverse.

The influence of the concept

Certainly, the concept has been important within academic Social Policy, not least because it provided a direct influence on Doyal and Gough's theory of human need (1991). Doyal and Gough asserted that the most basic human needs are physical health and personal autonomy. Not only do we need to be healthy enough to survive, but we must be able to make informed choices about our lives. Although these universal needs may be satisfied in a variety of ways, it is possible to specify the needs satisfiers that are optimally necessary for human dignity. The concept has been even more explicitly

adapted and extended by Nussbaum (2000b) whose work has been influential within Development Studies and who has been a central figure in the Human Development and Capability Association (see www.capabilityapproach.com).

Amartya Sen himself has had some ostensible influence on the United Nations Development Programme, contributing to recent Human Development Reports. In the 2000 report (UNDP 2000: ch. 1), for example, he presented his argument that the process of human development *is* the enhancement of human capabilities. However, it is argued elsewhere (Dean, 2002, 2008) that the international establishment never properly embraced his central premise. The prevailing establishment discourse – that is evident in other parts of the *Human Development Report 2000* – assumes that human development and the reduction of poverty self-evidently require economic growth, not human empowerment. Poor countries, it is supposed, should avail themselves of the opportunities that capitalist globalisation can provide. In later chapters of the *Human Development Report 2000* the term 'human capital' is insinuated as if it were a synonym for Sen's notion of 'human capabilities'. 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. Whether it represents a wilful corruption or a misunderstanding of the idea of human capabilities, the human capital approach continues to reflect essential elements of the economic and political orthodoxy once dubbed the 'Washington Consensus' (Williamson, 1990): a consensus by which the ability of the poor to 'succeed' is construed too readily as a property or characteristic of individuals. Even within the context of the targets set by the Millennium Development Goals (UNDP 2003) the recipe for tackling world poverty still favours the liberalisation of trade and financial markets, the privatisation and deregulation of economic production, flexible labour markets, low public spending and taxation, and selective social 'safety nets'.

A very recent application of the capabilities approach has been witnessed in the UK. In October 2007 the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) was created, absorbing into a single organisation the separate function of its three 'legacy commissions', the Commission for Equal Opportunities (EOC), the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) and the Disability Rights Commission (DRC). The EOC and the CRE had been created in the 1970s and the DRC in the 1990s with powers respectively to promote sex equality, 'race' equality and equality for disabled people and to investigate complaints of sexual and racial discrimination and discrimination against disabled people. The new body additionally has powers in relation to the enforcement of equality legislation relating to age, religion or belief, sexual orientation and transgender status and is charged with encouraging compliance both with the UK's Human Rights Act 1998 (which had, with effect from 2000, incorporated the provisions of the European Convention on Human Rights into domestic law) and with international human rights obligations more generally.

It is part of the EHRC's mission to develop 'an evidence-based understanding of the causes and effects of inequality for people across Britain' (www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/aboutus/mission). To prepare the EHRC for this

responsibility the UK government had in 2005 established an independent Equalities Review, whose final report drew in its definition of 'an equal society' upon elements of a capabilities approach:

An equal society protects and promotes equal, real freedom and substantive opportunity to live in the ways people value and would choose, so that everyone can flourish. An equal society recognises people's different needs, situations and goals and removes the barriers that limit what people can do and can be. (Equalities Review 2007: 6)

This definition was arrived at on the basis of evidence (Burchardt, 2006; Burchardt & Vizard, 2007; Vizard & Burchardt, 2007) which explicitly recommended a capability measurement framework as a way of monitoring inequalities in the UK. The framework identified and operationalised ten 'domains of valuable capabilities', derived from the international human rights framework. However, despite the potential breadth of its remit, the EHRC appears in practice to be primarily or expressly concerned with inequalities based on sex, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, religion and age. It is not concerned with general and/or social class inequalities and this clearly raises questions as to whether this will constitute an adequate operationalisation of a capabilities approach.

Limitations of the concept

Supporters of a capabilities approach may struggle satisfactorily to implement it. But I am concerned in this article not so much with the ways in which it can be colonised, distorted or subverted as with what may be the fundamental limitations of the capability concept. It is not simply that it is *possible* for official national and international agencies to adopt the language of capabilities while studiously ignoring key drivers of inequality and poverty. For all its attractions, the concept is *in itself* constrained. The 'space of capabilities' is abstracted from the 'space of commodities' and the 'space of functionings' in ways that necessarily constrain the critical purchase of the concept. If we consider the revolutionary Enlightenment objectives of *égalité* (equality), *liberté* (freedom), *fraternité* (solidarity), the capability approach to equality is framed in terms of freedom, but not solidarity. It is a liberal-individualist approach and while ethical individualism need not imply methodological individualism (Burchardt, 2006) the priority is individual liberty, not social solidarity; the freedom to choose, not the need to belong. In the space of capabilities the individual is one step removed; she is objectively distanced from the relations of power within which her identity and her life chances must be constituted. Within the space of capabilities there are three major issues which the individual cannot readily see and which are seldom clearly discussed. First and in any event, human beings cannot be free from their dependency upon other human beings. Second and third, under capitalist social relations of production, individuals can be free neither from hegemonic controls over their participation in the public realm, nor from the direct or indirect consequences of the exploitation of human labour.

The quotidian realities of human interdependency

Human society is axiomatically to be understood as an association of interdependent beings. And yet dependency in late-modern societies has become problematic (Dean & Rodgers, 2004; Dean & Taylor-Gooby, 1992). There is a fetishistic tendency for people to condemn the dependency of others and to deny their own dependency; even when - paradoxically - they may celebrate their own *dependability* for loved ones, neighbours or friends. The basis upon which we construe the nature of our membership of society (our citizenship) and the claims that we have against each other (our rights and capabilities) is predominantly liberal or 'contractarian': it assumes the individual to be an autonomous creature who survives by her bargaining with others (Dean, 2003; , 1999). The alternative basis upon which to construe such things - though it remains for the most part eclipsed - is more republican in nature or 'solidaristic': it assumes the individual to be a vulnerable creature who survives through her attachments to others (see also Turner, 1993; , 2006). The social order can therefore be understood not just in terms of how it organises its means of production, but also in terms of how its members care for and about each other (Kittay et al, 2005; Parker, 1981).

A similar reservation has been expressed by Deneulin and Stewart (2000), who contend that social structures (or 'structures of living together') matter not only because they may enable or constrain our capabilities, but because they are constitutive of our individual identities and the frameworks of meaning by which we value various functionings. Social solidarity is not necessarily inimical to freedom, but 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.

In fairness to the supporters of the capability approach, the capabilities some seek to define and promote are by no means exclusively premised on the self-sufficient individual subject. For example, Nussbaum's list of central human functional capabilities includes 'affiliation', which encompasses 'being able to live with and towards others' (2000b: 79). The Equalities Review's dimensions of equality 'score card' includes 'Individual, family and social life' (2007: 18). In each instance, the very legitimate concern is with the integrity of the individual in the context of her relationships. In Nussbaum's case she is clearly mindful of people's 'need for care in times of extreme dependency' (2000a: 48) so she seeks to recast liberalism to accommodate this; to move beyond the Kantian division of the human individual's rational and animal selves and to insist that being wholly dependent on another need not subserve one's moral personality. To this end, she argues, the goal should be to provide 'affirmative support for all the relevant capabilities'; to create 'a space' within which even the most impaired and dependent individual can 'exchange love and enjoy light and sound, free from confinement and mockery' (2000a: 56 and 58). Thus in her list of central human capabilities Nussbaum stipulates that a person should 'be able to imagine the situation of another and have compassion for that situation' (2000b: 79). But it seems that both the person and 'the other' are constituted as the abstract bearers of capabilities, not as what proponents of a feminist ethic of care would term a 'self-in-relationship' (Sevenhuijsen, 2000: 10). From the perspective of the feminist ethic of care the question is 'How can I achieve some freedom, yet remain connected?' (Hirschmann, 1997: 170). 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'.

A care framework offers a quite different approach to that of a capabilities framework, being premised on a relational ontology. The individual can only exist through and with others within networks of care (Clement, 1998; Sevenhuijsen, 1998; Tronto, 1994). The insight is not necessarily new since it resonates with the premises of *Ubuntu*, the ancient pan-African philosophy (Ramose, 2003); and - importantly - it is not necessarily sufficient when it comes to constructing the responsibilities we owe to strangers, rather than intimates. 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). While capability theorists seek to identify the components of a 'good life', Axel Honneth (1995) has suggested that the elements of what he calls an 'ethical life' include not only rights (which enable us to recognise the claims that others make upon us), but love (which enables us to recognise each other as needy creatures) and solidarity (which enables us to respect each other as creatures defined by difference). For Honneth, the story of humankind is a struggle for recognition as much as for freedom. Human beings must contend with their shared vulnerabilities as much as their quest for personal autonomy (cf. Turner, 2006).

The construction of the public realm

The aporia at the heart of the capability concept is the notion of the 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 is to determine what constitutes good reason? It is precisely because such judgements are necessarily contingent and relative that Sen himself has been reluctant to engage in the listing of essential capabilities. It is important nonetheless to recognise that though Sen may have been the originator of the capabilities approach, it is an approach that is now subject to an entire spectrum of interpretations. There are those at another end of the spectrum who insist that by public deliberative processes it is possible to determine what a list of central human capabilities should look like. This is, in part, what Nussbaum (2000b), Alkire (2002) and Burchardt and Vizard (2007) have attempted. What is more, proponents of the capability approach will include participation in public deliberation as a core capability. Nussbaum's list of central human functional capabilities includes 'Control over one's environment', which encompasses 'Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life' (2000b: 80). The Equalities Review's dimensions of equality 'score card' includes 'Participation, influence and voice' (2007: 18). And Sen himself has lately acknowledged the role of 'public reasoning' in evolving definitions of capabilities (2005).

But consensual agreements achieved in the process of public deliberation - whether in the course of participative poverty assessments or through citizens' juries or focus groups - may elide fundamental conflicts and hidden oppression. They may do nothing more than reflect prevailing hegemonic assumptions. What is more, the scope for public reasoning is inhibited by the dominant liberal notion of what constitutes 'the public'.

Whether or not we accept the concept of 'post-modernity', we can accept that what is currently happening is a 'hollowing out' of the sphere of the public and of the state (e.g.

Jessop, 2002); as a partial 'dissolution' of the public realm (Clarke, 2004); and a cultivation of the ethical space of the private and responsible individual (Bauman, 1993). The public sphere in which the modern (i.e. supposedly 'old') politics of class and redistribution had been conducted is discredited and shrinking and, though a post-modern (i.e. supposedly 'new') politics of identity, recognition and respect may be emerging, this is valorised within, and largely confined to, the personal or private sphere of the self (cf. Taylor, 1998). The personal and the private are not properly connected. To connect the two requires us, as Nancy Fraser has put it, to 'rethink the public sphere' (1997: ch. 3). For the moment, I am using the notion of 'public sphere' not as a synonym for the administrative state, nor to encompass the formalised realm of the market economy, but to refer to the space in which citizens deliberate their common affairs; in which it might be possible to debate the capabilities that are to be valued. While the public forum of antiquity may have been constituted as a literal rather than a metaphorical venue, the public sphere of modernity was an abstract ideal with particular significance for liberal democracies. It is the ideal that has justified 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 (Habermas, 1962).

Fraser's critique of the liberal ideal has four elements. First, the liberal ideal assumes that citizens are constituted as formally free and equal and that participation in the public sphere is open upon the same terms to everybody. The capabilities approach is in essence a restatement of this ideal. Fraser's argument is that it is impossible to ignore the effects of systemic inequalities in liberal societies that effectively exclude, or compromise participation by, a variety of social classes and groups, including women. Second, the liberal ideal assumes the existence of a single undifferentiated public. Fraser's argument is that societies are composed of many publics, with competing and overlapping interests. In practice, the interests of powerful elites may be advanced in the name of defending the common interest, while the interests of subordinate groups are ignored. Third, the liberal ideal seeks to distinguish between 'private' concerns and common concerns and to exclude consideration of the former. Fraser argues that inasmuch as economic and domestic concerns have been regarded as largely 'private', this has precluded or constrained debate about the nature of both class and gender oppression. Finally, the liberal ideal sought a rigid separation between state and civil society. This, Fraser argues, weakens the effective accountability of the state.

Fraser therefore makes the case for a different ideal; for a public sphere or realm in which there would be parity of participation and an end to systemic inequalities; in which diverse publics would be able to communicate across lines of difference; in which 'publicity' – in its literal and deepest sense – would be accorded to 'private' concerns where these are held in common; in which the boundaries between state and civil society would be permeable as more open forms of democracy develop. It is an argument that builds on Fraser's earlier critique of the capitalist welfare state and her call for a 'politics of needs interpretation' (1989), premised not only on demands for social justice, but also for parity of participation and, literally, for 'publicity' for the needs of poor and oppressed groups. This reconfigured ideal would expose the inequalities and injustices perpetuated by capitalism to public reasoning in a way that the capabilities approach has not and probably cannot.

The exploitation of labour under capitalism

Finally, and fundamentally, the capabilities approach remains largely silent on the issue of capitalism itself. It is not and does not purport to be a theory of social change³. Sen is clear that hunger and poverty result from human not natural failures (1999) and yet the capability concept does not of itself address the systemic impediments to human freedom that are associated with the capitalist mode of production. Nussbaum, for her part, is clear that the capabilities approach promotes 'truly human functioning' in a sense that she attributes to capitalism's arch critic, Karl Marx (Nussbaum, 2006: 85). And yet the implication of the capabilities approach appears to be that human development and capitalist economic development are - potentially, at least - commensurable.

Malcolm Bull (2007) has drawn out the common intellectual connections between, on the one hand, the capability approach and, on the other, both the Aristotelian notion of 'the good life' and Marx's notion in his early writings of 'species being' (1844). But it is important to grasp how the capability approach departs from the understanding of capitalism to be found in Marx's later writings. Marx contended that 'work' - that is to say purposive interaction with the world around us - both defines and constitutes the very basis of humanity's conscious 'species-being' and humanity's *social*, as opposed to its natural, existence (cf. Arendt, 1958). To that extent, work is different from repetitive and unending labour. The problem with capitalism, according to Marx, is that it transforms work into alienated labour, so detaching human beings not only from the objects of their production but from the essence of their social humanity. Marx's alternative vision - communism - was of a society in which there would be a unity of humanity and nature. To an extent, therefore, as Malcolm Bull has argued, the capabilities approach is 'equivalent to (and perhaps a substitute for) the projected path of human development envisioned by communism', albeit that they are different because 'moving from bare capability to fully human functioning is alienating just insofar as it is not universal' (2007).

In his later writings, Marx (1887) sought to expose the immanent logic of the commodity form and the wage relation under capitalism. His focus here was upon the extent to which the realisation of the surplus value upon which capital accumulation process depends rests upon the fiction of a free contract and, ultimately, the exploitation of labour. Sen (1999: 6) is anxious to defend the principles of free and fair market exchange, but Marx's argument had been that, although wage labour is preferable to slave labour, a contract for labour cannot be wholly freely entered so long as one party depends upon the sale of her labour power in order to obtain the means of subsistence. Markets for the exchange of goods and services have long served human ends, but a market *economy* 'violates the requirements of justice [because] individuals under capitalism do not have equal access to advantage' (Callinicos, 2003: 117). What is more, in a market economy, necessary and valuable functionings such as caring for children or for disabled relatives, studying, voluntary work in the community, and amateur artistic endeavour have no marketable value and are not rewarded as 'work' (e.g. Mooney, 2004). In this way, capitalism distorts our perceptions and our experience of work and of our species being. If it does not directly constrain our capabilities, it compromises them, because in a global

³ I am grateful to Tania Burchardt for this point.

market economy our ability at any particular moment to function as we choose may necessarily be achieved at the expense of others' freedom.

In fairness to the capability approach one of its great strengths is that indeed it *can* emphasise 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). The Equalities Review's dimensions of equality 'score card' is more prosaic. Under the heading 'Productive and valued activities', it focuses first on 'access to employment', but also upon 'positive experience in the workplace, work/life balance, and being able to care for others' (2007: 18), themes that are elaborated elsewhere within its report. Once again, however, it is not simply that the capabilities approach can be too easily inflected toward an accommodation with the imperatives of the market economy, but that it is inherently liberal-individualist. The individual is constructed as an abstract bearer of freedoms, rights and/or the capabilities that should ideally flow from these. Marx had railed against the illusory rights of social life (or 'civil society') under capitalist relations of production which, far from manifesting the liberty of the subject, are 'nothing but the expression of his absolute enslavement and of the loss of his human nature' (1845: 225). The abstract nature of the individual citizen betrays an alienated rather an emancipated status. The capability approach may demand substantive freedoms to choose, but the subject remains as abstract as ever and her supposed choices are formal constructs, not substantive demands.

Conclusion

The capabilities approach has undeniable attractions, precisely because of the way in which it recaptures elements of Aristotle's pre-enlightenment moral philosophy, albeit that it does not and perhaps cannot escape the influence of Western Enlightenment liberalism. It should be noted, incidentally, that 'radical Aristotelians' express parallel reservations about the Marxist interpretation of Aristotelian moral philosophy (Macintyre, 2007). The fact remains, however, that capabilities reflect an abstraction from philosophical judgements about the nature of human virtues; virtues that exist to be discovered as opposed to concrete human needs that occur as and when they are experienced.

Needs may be translated into claims in the course of a struggle for human survival. Claims may in turn be translated into rights in the struggle for human emancipation. My concern is that the ascendancy of the capabilities approach distracts attention from a politics of need (Soper, 1981) or of needs interpretation (Fraser, 1989). The attempt in the UK by or on behalf of the Equalities Review to read off a 'core' set of desirable capabilities from the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was imaginative. But there is a sense in which this amounts to reading backwards from the outcome of previous historically specific struggles over the interpretation of human needs. The UDHR was a consensual compromise reached in the post-World War II era that made the world safe for the continued expansion of global capitalism. The resulting list of capabilities - translated by the Equalities Review into its dimensions of equality

'score card' - does not of itself challenge the roots of social injustice or the quotidian relations of power through which we struggle to name and claim our needs.

This article contends that, although it has its limitations, the discourse of rights provides a more immediate strategic terrain for a politics of need than a discourse of capabilities, particularly if capabilities are to be construed at one stage removed from the context in which our rights have been settled or through which they can be disputed and extended. The capabilities approach is well suited to a consensual approach, but a politics of need should be about struggle, not consensus: the struggle for the recognition of unspoken needs; the struggle for more direct forms of political participation; the struggle against exploitation and the systemic injustices of capitalism.

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