Towards a more critical appraisal of social policies - The contribution of the capability approach

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Critical Social Policy
and the Capability Approach

The (European) welfare state as well as the political space of "the social" is currently being reorganised in a fundamental way. This has major implications for any attempt to contribute to a more just or even emancipatory way of shaping "the social". The authors discuss what the Capabilities Approach (CA) may contribute to this attempt. Rather than assessing the philosophical foundation of this approach, "Shaping the Social" critically discusses the potentials and pitfalls of analysing social and labour-market policy and in particular social services from a capabilities perspective.

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Social policy is based on the selection of a normative yardstick (work, employability, social investment state, capabilities, etc.) and of a cognitive or informational basis. In other words, recipients of social policies are both assessed against a cognitive basis, which means that some information is taken into account while other pieces of information are discarded when evaluating their situation, and submitted to normative expectations with regard to their behavior and preparation of their future. Nowadays, these information and expectations very much revolve around the issue of work and employment; therefore recipients are assessed along their degree of employability, i.e. their likelihood to find a job, and they are expected to deploy all their efforts towards a quick and possibly long-lasting professional integration where paid wages will substitute cash benefits. Other ways to assess people and shape their behaviors are of course available and social policies may privilege alternative ways in these two respects. What is however impossible is that social policies are completely devoid of such cognitive and normative dimensions, they simply cannot escape to be “biased” or selective in their cognitive and normative foundations. Hence, social policy is not, and cannot be, a value-free field, nor is the knowledge or informational basis of social policy completely objective as it relies on the selection of certain facts or information considered as particularly relevant and the exclusion (or discarding) of all other facts.

Therefore, when analyzing social policies, it is essential to have a normative and analytical framework that allows questioning the twofold selection process (normative and cognitive) that lies at their very core. Positivist approaches are not satisfactory insofar as they claim not to be concerned with values, but with facts; they thus consider social policies as facts deprived of values, which does not resist a rigorous empirical analysis. All the same, functionalist perspectives that envisage social policies as responses to societal phenomena, do not allow grasping the deep-seated implications of the two selection processes underlying all social policies. These claim that social problems and their definitions are facts and not social constructions: in other words there is no cognitive selection within social policies, the definition of social problems is fully scientific and objective and the designed public policies enjoy the same objectivity. In this case too, the cognitive and normative dimensions of social policies are denied, in favor of an objective view of both
societal problems and public responses. We contend that both these approaches rely on a truncated view of social policies and that we need an alternative approach to fully grasp the scope of social policies, their modes of operation and their impact on recipients and society at large. We claim that the capability approach (CA) fulfills precisely these objectives and thus qualify as a critical approach to social policy insofar as it combines the three components of any critical social science according to, e.g., Horkheimer, Bohman and De Munk, namely a normative, a cognitive and a political dimension. Section 1 presents these three components. Section 2 illustrates that the CA allows adequately implementing these dimensions in the field of social policies and thus qualifies as an appropriate framework for the advancement of critical social policy. It shows how it contributes to questioning the transformations of contemporary social policies toward activation, individualization and territorialization. Section 3 draws a synthesis and concludes.

The three dimensions of critical social science

Following Horkheimer (1972), any critical theory has a threefold aim: describe and explain social reality, assess and evaluate it, and strive to transform this reality via consulting or intervention. This distinguishes it from what he calls “traditional” theories aiming at mirroring reality as it is. Let us emphasize this: critical social science is at the same time descriptive/explanatory, normative and transformative. In other words, it is rigorously scientific in that it produces valid descriptions and explanations, but it is also normative insofar as it seeks to assess reality and transform it. In scientific terms, the main challenge of critical social science is then to hold together these two dimensions: cognitive and normative, it is also what demarcates it from positivist and functionalist approaches described above and what makes it a more adequate perspective in our view. In practical terms, critical social science requires that researchers not only produce evaluations of social reality, but strive to transform it, which calls for a specific theory of democracy and of the place of academics and scientists in democratic processes (Bohman 1996). This subsection presents these issues and strives to demonstrate that the capability approach allows addressing these challenges in a proper way and therefore paves the way towards a critical social science in the field of social policies. This perspective will then be presented in more detail in the next section.

Putnam (2002) has convincingly shown that the dichotomy between facts and values does not hold, instead he insists on the necessary “entanglement of fact and value” (28ff.). This has deep-seated consequences on the way to “practice” social science; indeed it implies that the cognitive moment of social science, be it critical or conventional, ought to integrate both facts and values in the scope of empirical investigation. This especially holds for public policies: they are necessarily inspired by values, which does by no means imply that they are ideological or false, but that they pursue certain specific objectives and not others, and promote certain values and not others. Public policy necessarily includes a normative moment, where values and goals are selected; only afterwards are tools and instruments designed to implement these objectives. Hence, facts and values are inevitably entangled in the field of public policy.

On this basis it is possible to interpret the cognitive moment of a social science of public action in two different ways. On the one hand, the normative step is considered as outside the field of social science that should have no say in this respect; it is only the design of effective programs that is considered to lie within the realm of social science, thus focusing on the issue of efficiency. That is the path pursued by the defenders of so-called “evidence-based policies” (EBP). These consider scientific knowledge, which is supposed to be value-free and fully objective, to be the basis of policy-making in systems of modern governance (e.g., Sanderson 2002a, 2002b). In this perspective, social science is called to systematically assess the outcomes and impacts of existing policies with a view to providing “continuous quality improvement in the achievement of policy objectives” (Sherman 1998: 6). As Sanderson underlines, EBP promotes “accountability in terms of results” evidence that government is working effectively (...) and improvement through more effective policies and programmes – evidence of how well such policies and programmes ‘work’ in different circumstances” (2002b: 3). This focus on policy effectiveness, i.e. on what works”, goes hand in hand with reinforced collaboration between policy makers and researchers (envisioned as experts). Such a view has significant consequences on social science: first, it requires that social scientists endorse, or at least do not question, the normativity selected by policy-makers during the first step of their action; second, it implies that social scientists strive to produce empirical knowledge that can be useful and communicable to policy-makers, which may result in leaving aside complex issues that are difficult to communicate and privileging simple, even simplistic in some cases, definitions of social problems. This is in line with the OECD recommendation that “the social sciences have to strengthen their position in order to reconquer their influence and effectiveness in the policy field. Evidence-based policy and broader approaches can help address the problems inherent in social sciences’ relations with policy” (OECD 2001: 3). To sum up, such a conception of social science relies on: a) a simplified view of its cognitive moment (focusing on efficiency issues and what works), b) a denial of its normative moment, i.e. a negation of the entanglement of fact and value (claiming instead the production of objective and value-free knowledge), c) a specific position of scientists as
experts subordinated to the views of policy-makers. This clearly does not qualify as critical social science. By contrast, the capability approach opens up the path toward another view of social science in the field of public policy, which makes a significant difference on all three dimensions identified by Horkheimer, Bohman and De Munck.

The cognitive component of critical social science

On the cognitive side, the capability approach builds its epistemological basis on the recognition of the entanglement of fact and value. This implies that the empirical investigation must grasp not only facts (or what are supposed to be facts), but also values. If the attention focuses only on facts and strives to discard values, then the result is not objective knowledge, but truncated knowledge. Therefore analytical tools are needed to apprehend the inseparably factual and normative components of social reality. This holds especially for public policies: social science in this field is not a matter of identifying objective facts, but to see how facts and values are entangled in the design and implementation of public policies. Three concepts developed by Amartya Sen are particularly useful in this respect.

First the notion of “informational basis of judgement in justice” or IBJ (Sen 1992) emphasizes that all individual or social judgements, i.e. all public policies, are based on a specific set of information to the exclusion of all other information. For instance, defining deprivation in terms of income or in terms of capabilities (i.e. the real freedom to live the life one has reason to value) leads to very different views of the public action that is needed to struggle against poverty. Equality is also an ambivalent concept that can be defined along a plurality of informational bases. Indeed, many things can be equalized: incomes, resources, capabilities, levels of education, etc. as Sen himself has emphasized (Sen 1982a, 1992). Following the informational basis selected for the definition of equality, poverty or other issues, public action will pursue different objectives and mobilize different tools and instruments. The selection of an IBJ (that can be more or less specific or exhaustive) is a necessary component of policy-making, as it allows a more focused use of resources and means. Evidence-based policies are no exception to this rule: they are based on a particular IBJ and the decision to focus on this specific basis (and to discard all other information on the ground of their purported lower relevance) is not the mechanical consequence of scientific evidence as EBP defenders would have it; rather it is a political choice. This choice is inspired by normative preferences. Hence, the empirical investigation of how IBJs are designed sheds light on the entanglement of fact and value in the policy field under scrutiny.

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Second, Sen insists that “description isn’t just observing and reporting; it involves the exercise – possibly difficult – of selecting” (Sen 1982b: 433). As a matter of fact, description cannot be defined only as an exercise of truth (where one is trying to stick to the observation of objective facts), rather it requires choosing among a plurality of statements or facts, which can all be envisaged as true or objective, those that will be considered as the most relevant for the purpose of description. As a result, “it is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that any conscious act of description contains some theory – usually implicit – about the relative importance of the various statements dealing with the subject matter. I shall call this the ‘choice basis of description’” (ibid.). Description inevitably involves choice and selection, which is an evaluative exercise requiring competences other than methodological or technical skills. This does of course not imply that description has no connection whatsoever with objective knowledge and is necessarily ideologically-driven. Rather, it means that there may be many possible true statements about one object, and description implies the selection of one among these. In the field of public policies too, there is a need for such a selection among the various possible descriptions of social reality produced by social scientists. This implies that also evidence-based policies rely on a selection of the evidence that is considered as relevant, what Sen calls a “choice basis of description”. Hence, even in EBP and despite their claim for being objective and value-free, policy-makers choose among many pieces of (sometimes contradictory) evidence produced by various social science researchers. This moment of selection, i.e. the “choice basis of description”, needs to be included in the scientific investigation if the entanglement between fact and value in policy-making is to be fully apprehended.

The third notion, “positional objectivity”, further clarifies Sen’s epistemological position. Following this perspective, all observations or descriptions depend on one’s position vis-à-vis the objects (persons, situations, etc.) observed or described. This applies to the scientific observation of physical objects, but also to the realm of beliefs, action, and practical reason. In Sen’s words, objectivity cannot be seen “in the form of invariance with respect to individual observers and their positions” (Sen 2002: 464). In decision theory, such positional objectivity implies that a person makes her decisions on the basis of her specific position, i.e. her past experience, her education, her social status, etc. One point needs emphasising: positional objectivity does not coincide with subjectivism or relativism, as positional observations “have some claim to being objective within their own terms” (ibid: 471). In contrast, EBP claim to be absolutely objective, i.e. to apply to all people and all situations in a given administrative or political unit. Such claim to absolute objectivity stands in sharp contrast with the notion of positional objectivity. One piece of scientific evidence (one could say: one specific positional objectivity) is presented as the single legitimate evidence as if it stood for absolute
objectivity, and on this ground imposed on all actors concerned. EBP insistence on positional invariance, i.e. on absolute objectivity, is in fact one way to reduce policy-making to a more technical issue: if there is one single undisputable evidence, there is no need for political debate. In opposition, positional objectivity makes space for public reasoning and politics.

These three notions clearly demarcate Sen’s epistemological position from that of EBP defenders. The entanglement of fact and value is recognised in the capability approach and is considered as fully relevant when defining the purpose and tools of social science. This is reflected in the other two dimensions inherent in any critical social science, namely the normative and the political moments. If positional objectivity is taken seriously, the plurality of available normative references and the impossibility to assert the superiority of one over the other are recognized. This questions the dichotomy between positivists claiming to be concerned only by facts, and other scientific conceptions that ought to be discarded because of their presumed normative or ideological drifts. Positivists too occupy a specific position and thus have their own positional objectivity, their descriptions are also pervaded by a “choice basis” and a determined informational basis. Therefore, it is not a matter of dividing true science, based only on facts, and false knowledge or ideology, relying on value and norms, but a matter of recognising that all science includes a normative moment. The positivist claim for objectivity does not cancel this moment, but strives to occult it, just like EBP defenders try to hide the normative step in policy-making. Sen’s three notions – informational basis of judgement, description as choice, positional objectivity – emphasize that a normative selection is inescapable in policy-making, as well as in social science, because of the entanglement of fact and value.

The normative moment: a prerequisite for critical social science

The capability approach, however, requires going one step further: it is not only a matter of taking facts and values on board when describing and explaining social reality, but also of assessing it against the yardstick of capabilities. In this respect, a pitfall to be avoided is linked to paternalism, in which scientists claim to detain the truth or the right solution and strive to impose it on other actors. This would stand in sharp contrast with the notion of “positional objectivity” presented above: if scientists can reach only a specific positional objectivity, and not absolute objectivity, then it means that they can discover only one part of objective reality, not the whole of it. A paternalist behaviour would then run the risk of imposing a specific view, though objective, on all others and therefore deny the relevance of all other positional objectivities. Two issues deserve mention here.

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First, the attitude of the scientist when assessing social reality is key: the normative basis of social science, i.e. the “choice basis of description” in Sen’s words, is to be made explicit so that norms or values are not taken for granted or “smuggled” into social science (De Munck 2011). Indeed, normative dogmatism may take place either explicitly, when bluntly asserting that one’s values are more legitimate than the others, or implicitly, when trying to hide the existence of this normative basis. Hence, asserting the dichotomy between facts and values and claiming to be concerned only with value-free facts, boils down to pretending that one escapes the necessity of a “choice basis of description”, which is the implicit road toward normative dogmatism. As such, positivism or the claim for value-free knowledge in the field of public policy is paradoxically exposed to be yet another kind of normative dogmatism, where undisputed values are presented as if they were valid social science. To avoid this pitfall, all assessments of social reality must make clear and explicit their value bases, hence accepting to submit them to public discussion. Indeed, in the terms of critical social science advocated in this paper, no positional objectivity can claim to be subtracted from public attention, not even that of policy-makers or scientists.

Second, the very content of this normative basis, i.e. the “choice basis of description”, also matters. The more complete or specific it is, the more it risks discarding competing views on dogmatic grounds. For instance, if the purpose of economic and social policies is to increase the employment rate of the overall population, the objective is precisely formulated and it may result in programs or interventions that prevent pursuing other objectives. By contrast, if the targets pursued are autonomy and the enhancement of people’s capabilities, it allows setting up a greater variety of actions and measures. Hence, choosing a rather vague yardstick allows enlarging the informational basis of public policies and reduces the risk of imposing standard programs on all people concerned. Human rights, capabilities, autonomy, etc. are examples of such broad targets that allow taking tailor-made measures adapted to all specific situations. The capability approach thus insists that the normative reference of public policies ought to be broad enough to allow all viewpoints to express themselves when it comes to implementing them: the more restrictive and precise this normative reference, the less local actors and implementers will be allowed taking into account local and individual circumstances. This is certainly an important condition if normative dogmatisms of all kinds are to be avoided. Another point matters here, namely that the normative reference ought to be submitted to revision via public discussion. All normative references are based on specific positional objectivities, it is then important that they may be confronted to other positional objectivities and therefore open to revision. In Sen’s view, theories of justice or normative references are necessarily partial and imperfect, and public discussion is the way to constantly improve them. The hierarchy of values and social norms
cannot be decided by experts or by policy-makers alone, it has to be the outcome of a public debate.

These views clearly differ from those held by EBP defenders. However, let us emphasize that our purpose here is not to contend that EBP are ideological products reflecting the norms and values of dominant classes and that they should therefore be abandoned in favour of genuinely objective policy-making based on unquestionable evidence. Rather, what is problematic with EBP is that policy-making is presented as an exercise in objectivity and truth that can be fully decidable, i.e. where definitive answers and solutions can be found. Sen’s work and its focus on the variety of possible normative references and corresponding IBJs convincingly demonstrate that it is neither possible nor desirable to fix once and for all this issue. Which information is taken into account and which one is to be discarded cannot be decided beforehand:

"Indeed, public participation in these valuation debates – in explicit or implicit forms – is a crucial part of the exercise of democracy and responsible social choice" (Sen 1999: 110). The main problem with EBP is that it tries to negate the necessity of this democratic exercise and to reduce politics to a mere technical question that can be solved without public debate. By contrast, the capability approach contends that normative choices are the (always partial) outcomes of an ongoing public discussion (Sen 2009).

The transformative potential of critical social science

This issue relates to the relationship between critical social science and politics. Two alternatives can be envisaged: either the researcher is the one who knows what should be done to overcome social problems, in this case he positions himself in a kind of patronizing role; or he is a participant among others in policy making and public debate, which does not mean that science does not give him a special status, but that this status does not grant him absolute superiority over the other participants in the public discussion. Here again, the epistemological basis of the capability approach makes for a specific role of the social science researcher. Since s/he represents a positional objectivity among others, he cannot patronize the others and tell them what the most appropriate solution to social problems is. All the same, s/he cannot remain in the ivory tower of academy, keeping aside from debates about values and claiming to stick to the empirical investigation of facts; facts and values are entangled, especially in the field of public policies. In other words, s/he retains an expert knowledge about certain issues, but this knowledge does not disqualify all other positional objectivities and it does not preclude the necessity and relevance of public discussion about these very issues. S/he is called to be a “critical-reflective participant” (Couzens Hoy & McCarthy 1994: 81, quoted in De Munk 2011). Two concepts drawn from the capability approach can be useful in trying to identify more precisely the place of the researcher in the public debate, namely “constructive democracy” (e.g. Sen 1999) and “capability for voice” (e.g. Bonvin 2012).

In Sen’s perspective, democracy has three main dimensions: an intrinsic one, as it is preferable to participate than the contrary; an instrumental one, insofar as democracy allows defending one’s viewpoint more efficiently; a constructive one, since all values, programs, policies, etc. are the outcome of a collective process. This latter dimension derives directly from the epistemological basis of the capability approach: since I have my own positional objectivity that no one can substitute, it is important that I take part in the collective process and bring it in my own knowledge and information. This implies that the researcher’s participation to the public discussion carries with it an additional informational value that translates into a more informed decision-making process. Remaining in the ivory tower of academy would imply that this information is lost for public policies. Furthermore, the epistemology of the CA emphasizes that the researcher has no privileged position per se in the public debate. His/her specific status derives from the empirical knowledge s/he has collected, which provides key information for decision-making and improves its knowledge base, and from his/her capacity to have a critical and theoretically informed standpoint vis-à-vis social issues. Hence s/he may be more capable to avoid corporatist or ego-centric interpretations and assume a more systemic perspective. This does not mean that social science researchers necessarily promote the general interest or the common good better than other categories of people, but that they can make a specific and valuable contribution to the public debate, via their scientific knowledge and ability to take a more encompassing view on problems. Their intervention can take place in the public sphere as well as in more limited audiences, such as professional associations or expertise mandated by policy-makers (De Munk 2011). Hence, social scientists have a specific added value in terms of public reasoning, all the same they do not dictate the truth or the last word about the most appropriate way to tackle the social problems they investigate.

“Capability for voice” designates the ability to voice one’s concerns and make them count in the course of a collective decision-making process. In other words, it is about the ability of all citizens to push their ideas in public arenas. Hence, it depends on many parameters such as a) their cognitive abilities – e.g. rhetoric and communicative skills, but also ability to get the available information and, even more significantly, to produce one’s own informational basis and description, b) their political abilities – e.g. ability to deploy collective action in favour of one’s viewpoints, c) the extent of entitlements and rights they have access to, esp. procedural rights that recognize the right to take part into a decision-making process, etc. But it also depends on the readiness of institutional interlocutors to take account of their point of view. Indeed, capability for voice is not only a matter of individual or collective
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The capability approach as a framework for critical social policy

In our view the capability approach is more relevant than alternative approaches to critically assess the current transformations of social policies, namely activation, individualization and territorialization. These issues will be successively tackled in the next two subsections.

A critical approach to activation: the CA contribution

Activation strategies underline that beneficiaries’ agency matters, which means that resourcist approaches focusing on the redistribution of cash benefits are not adequate as they do not allow tackling this issue; also approaches such as the ‘social investment welfare state’ (e.g. Morel, Palier, Palme 2012) insist on enhancing people’s productivity in the long run and increasing the employment rate as the main objectives of social policies and activation programs, thereby they purport a reductionist view of “agency”. By contrast, the capability approach suggests a more encompassing view of “agency” not restricted to work or productive activity, but integrating all kinds of activities one may have reason to value. In the CA words, what matters is one’s real freedom to lead the life one has reason to value, as a consequence the development of these real freedoms or capabilities is envisaged as the key objective of social policies. In the definition of “Capabilities”, three dimensions are essential. First, it is about real freedom and not simply formal freedom. This implies that conversion factors are needed to make freedom real: the distribution of cash resources is not enough to guarantee agency freedom; in the same way, neither the enhancement of employability, nor the creation of numerous jobs will suffice per se. A capability perspective on the recipients’ agency requires that all these dimensions are taken account of: adequate resources must be provided to avoid that people are constrained to take up any jobs in order to make a living; competencies must be developed so that they are allowed to have a valuable job in their eyes; and jobs of high quality must be created and made available to the beneficiaries of social policies. Thus, the solution to unemployment lies in the combination of redistributive benefits, employability-enhancing devices and employment policies. If one is missing, then the agency of recipients risks being obstructed. Second, the definition of capabilities insists on their value for the persons concerned, thereby implying that individual preferences matter and are to be taken into account when defining the meaning and content of “activation” or “agency”. If people’s values or preferences are to be taken seriously, then all constraining approaches coinciding with the imposition of certain programs or mea-
sures on non-compliant beneficiaries may be considered as problematic in a capability perspective. However, this does not mean that individual preferences ought to prevail in all cases, as is suggested by the third dimension of the definition of "capabilities". Indeed, "capabilities" do not coincide with the unconditional validation of subjective values or preferences, which could lead to recognize as legitimate expensive tastes (e.g. surfing in Hawaii) or, symmetrically, adaptive preferences (i.e. people accepting their fate because they do not envisage any alternative). Rather "capabilities" refer to preferences one has reason to value. This implies that preferences need to confront themselves to other viewpoints and pass the test of public discussion before being validated. Those preferences that do not pass this test cannot qualify as reasonable preferences that ought to be supported by the collectivity.

With these three components (real freedom, value and preferences, reason), the definition of "capability" remains fuzzy: it is incomplete and allows for a plurality of activities to be envisaged as valuable, but it is not empty as it defines a yardstick that allows discriminating between capability-friendly activation or agency and other forms of activation. Capability-friendly strategies strive to promote real freedom and take seriously individual preferences and values provided they pass the test of public discussion. This can be considered as the substantial component of the capability approach. In this perspective, critical social science is called to use this encompassing yardstick to analyse existing social policies, their informational basis and normative references, to assess them and, if necessary, to push decision-makers to reform them. To what extent do the objectives and tools mobilized e.g. in the flexibility strategies, in the recently adopted Social Investment Package, in national activation programs, etc. allow enhancing the capabilities of their beneficiaries to lead a life they have reason to value? Answering such a question requires taking a more encompassing stance on social policies and assessing them along another yardstick than the one endorsed by policy-makers. This in our view is what makes the added value of critical social science and more particularly of the CA in the field of social policies.

**Individualization and territorialization against the capability approach**

If the content of the notion of "agency" is incomplete, i.e. it is not determined in an exhaustive way, then there is a need for a procedural component in order to complete it. In a capability perspective, the precise content of this notion and of the activation programs implementing it is to be decided at a situated level. What matters is that all relevant positional objectivities, i.e. the viewpoints of all involved actors, are taken into account in this process. This issue relates precisely to the other two transformations of the welfare state,
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... level, i.e. investigating how the various actors and their viewpoints, informational bases of judgment and positional objectivities are taken into account when designing and implementing a public policy. This is not a matter of efficiency in implementing existing tools, but an issue of unveiling the more or less democratic character of the processes at work when deciding about the ends and means of public policies. The degree of democracy within the field of public action is at stake here. What matters is that the choice basis of public action is not monopolized by a single actor or a coalition of some of them. In normative terms, this implies assessing public action and its operational modalities against the notions of “capability for voice” and “constructive democracy”. This calls for a situated view of public action, which contrasts both with a top-down managerial conception (focused on efficiency in reaching the targets defined by central actors) and with a localist view leaving all designing and implementing powers into the hands of street-level bureaucrats (Storper & Salais 1997). Constructive democracy requires that all viewpoints are taken seriously; as a consequence the central state has the responsibility to set up adequate procedural conditions that give all stakeholders as much voice as possible. The promotion of the most vulnerable people’s voice is certainly part of the state’s duties in this perspective. In pragmatic terms, the critical social scientist is called to take part in the making of this situated view of public action. This implies taking the floor with his/her own views as a scientist, which are not substitutable by managerialist views and do not coincide with the defense of local agent’s corporatist interests; this also requires acting as a kind of loudspeaker of the most silent actors’ voices, in this case beneficiaries and, to some extent, local agents.

In our view, the combination of the substantial and procedural dimensions of the capability approach – as briefly described in this section – makes of it an adequate tool to unveil the normativity of current social policies, critically assess it and promote another view of public action in the field of social policies.

Conclusion: the capability approach as a foundation for critical social policy

We contend that the capability approach provides an adequate and workable combination of the three dimensions of critical social science. It recognizes that facts and values are entangled and empirically investigates the modalities and significance of this entanglement. The CA does not strive to separate fact and value, but takes normative considerations on board of scientific analysis. This perspective can be mobilized for taking a more critical stance on social policies. Indeed, the endorsement of the capability approach has wide-ran-
ging consequences on social policy analysis as we briefly summarize in this conclusion.

First, the CA requires that, when analyzing social policies, an extended informational basis be taken into account. Therefore, the IBJ used by the critical social policy analyst should not stick to the official views, but allow critically scrutinizing them. This implies integrating all kinds of conversion factors in the analysis and see to what extent they are considered in the official views about the ends and means of social policies. A life course trajectory is a complex combination of various factors (family, social capital, school trajectories, qualifications, financial situation, etc.) and what matters is whether the IBJ of social policies allows taking into account, for each and every individual trajectory, all conversion (or obstruction) factors that matter. In other words, is complexity allowed to take its due place within social policies? This perspective does not amount to the pursuit of an illusory exhaustive knowledge of all individual trajectories and all relevant individual, social and environmental conversion factors; this would indeed be a Prometheus task, and not very pragmatic for political purposes. More realistically, it insists on the diversity of possible relevant factors and on the necessity to keep social policies “open” and “incomplete” in order to let the necessary space for taking into consideration all relevant factors. By contrast, a “making work pay” approach insists that social policies should focus on work and productivity, which might result in neglecting other equally relevant factors. The issue here is not only to integrate more factors and make the picture more complex, but also and more importantly to assess the relevance of these factors against the yardstick of capabilities. As a matter of fact, complexity by itself (or the piling up of a multiplicity of parameters) does not provide for a critical viewpoint on social policy, a normative reference is needed too.

Second, there is a procedural moment in social policies and this moment needs to be integrated in the analysis. Not only the content of social policies matters, but also how they are implemented by street-level bureaucrats and local agents: to what extent do design and implementation processes take place according to the notions of “capability for voice” and “constructive democracy”? The black box of the “welfare state in action” needs to be opened and submitted to critical scrutiny.

Thirdly, the capability approach also purports a specific view of the political dimension of critical social policy and, thus, a specific view of the role of the critical social policy analyst in the public sphere. In this perspective, the analyst should not be confined to the role of an expert, bringing an objective and scientifically grounded position in the debate, although this is important. He should also strive to give a voice to those who are voiceless, thus allowing their informational basis and positional objectivities to be expressed more efficiently in the public sphere. If constructive democracy and capability for voice require that all viewpoints are to be expressed and taken into account, then researchers could help in reaching this target by giving more voice to the most vulnerable who are often the most silent. This is in line with Dewey’s pragmatist ideas about what a social inquiry should be (Dewey 1938). Furthermore, the contribution of the researcher in the public sphere should not be restricted to the issue of efficiency; it should also, and more significantly, encompass the issue of the relevance or appropriateness of social policies (March & Olsen 2006). What matters most is not whether social policies can efficiently reach their goals, but whether these targets are relevant, i.e., whether they allow the development of their beneficiaries’ capabilities. Hence, the CA provides for another way to assess social policies and to push alternative views in the public sphere.

Critical social policy requires the combination of all three dimensions: cognitive, normative and political. If there is no political moment (but only normative and cognitive ones), then the researcher situates him/herself in an overarching position that may prevent him/her from taking seriously the actors’ viewpoints, preferences and values. S/he is then exposed to imposing his/her positional objectivity or description of a social problem, thereby discarding the alternative views expressed by those who take part in the empirical investigation. As such, s/he is not part of a constructive democratic process and risks falling into patronizing in an expert or technocratic way. If by contrast there is no cognitive moment (only a normative and a political one), then the analyst becomes a militant or an ideologist. What the capability approach requires is that the three moments are held together. In our view, the fulfillment of this condition is the very prerequisite for the development and reinforcement of a critical social policy adjusted to the challenges of contemporary social policies.

References


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