New Approaches Towards the ‘Good Life’: Applications and Transformations of the Capability Approach

Karie Cross

To cite this article: Karie Cross (2017) New Approaches Towards the ‘Good Life’: Applications and Transformations of the Capability Approach, Journal of Human Development and Capabilities, 18:1, 136-137, DOI: 10.1080/19452829.2017.1284949

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/19452829.2017.1284949

Published online: 10 Feb 2017.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 120

View Crossmark data
Book Reviews

New Approaches Towards the ‘Good Life’: Applications and Transformations of the Capability Approach
Edited by Hans-Uwe Otto & Sabine Schäfer

*New Approaches Towards the ‘Good Life’: Applications and Transformations of the Capability Approach* ties the capability approach to social scientific methods and continental philosophy, addressing what Ingrid Robeyns has designated as a major weakness of the approach—the under-theorised relations among individuals, the state, and society (p. 10).

This edited volume, focused on education, illustrates the utility of bringing methods (such as grounded theory, intersectionality, and biographical narrative), and concepts (such as Paul Ricoeur’s recognition), to the capability approach, which draws largely on economics and analytic philosophy. However, given the broad concerns of the capability approach and the narrow educational focus of this edited volume, many of the relationships among individuals, state, and society remain unclear. Certainly, education policy has a great deal to do with human capabilities, but both the title and the introductory chapter of this book—suggestive of broad debates about the content and meaning of the good life—set up thematic expectations which the volume does not meet. Still, many of the essays in this volume offer helpful contributions to scholarship on human capabilities.

The best of the essays take up important gaps in the capability approach and offer philosophical or methodological remedies. Erika Bozzato suggests pairing the capability approach with critical discourse analysis, because of the latter’s ability to investigate the role of discourses within social practices and to unveil power relations (p. 35). Rightly arguing that the capability approach’s turn to democratic deliberation does not adequately address institutionalised power, Bozzato follows Philip Pettit to argue that the goal of capability-oriented policies should be the absence of domination. Her case study of educational debates within Kosovo convincingly shows the ways in which ethnically exclusivist public discourses can influence people’s capability sets (p. 45). In a similar turn to critical theory, Anika Duvaneck employs a case study of local educational politics in Germany to show that the capability approach often requires certain political conditions in order to work for social justice. Pairing capabilities with critical materialist theory helps to reveal the ways in which material conditions can counter progressive goals that target capabilities deprivations. For example, underfunded school districts often must accommodate middle-class, rather than lower-class, parents in order to secure funding from them (p. 66).

Although the volume’s engagement with critical theory is helpful for the capability approach, its turn to social science methods is less persuasive, largely because many of the methods employed by the authors lack rigour. Rada Jancic draws conclusions based upon the experiences of just five teachers. She also fails to tell us why she has selected Serbia for her case study, and how its history of ethnic conflict might impact the
teacher–pupil interactions which she studies. Lakshmi Venkataraman fails to report the nature of his ethnographic methods, in his study of caste, class, and education in a South Indian village. His quotations appear to come from a single individual, despite the fact that his research focuses on the important concept of intersectionality, which highlights the importance of gathering experiences from many different social locations.

Other problems in this volume stem from some of the essays’ superficial engagements with the capability approach. Venkataraman’s essay refers to the “capability formation of human agency” without explaining what that means (p. 110). Does his idea of agency based upon capabilities exclude functionings? Is his version of agency tied to well-being, as Nussbaum conceives of it, or distinct from it, as Sen argues? Venkataraman’s conceptual fuzziness is one of many examples of the problems that arise when researchers adopt the view of this volume’s editors: it does not matter whether social science research draws from Sen, Nussbaum, or both, when using their approaches in an “instrumental way in order to enrich empirical research projects embedded in the social sciences” (p. 8). I agree that it is appropriate for researchers to choose either Sen or Nussbaum, according to which conception best fits their project. However, I strongly disagree with the implication that empirical researchers are free to instrumentalise philosophy, staying above the fray of philosophical debates in order to get on with social science research. Such an argument leads to the conceptual disarray which plagues this volume. Social scientists, and particularly those who are interested in enriching the concepts of a normative approach like human development, should not simply ignore philosophical debates.

I urge readers to look to this volume for innovative collaborations between the capabilities approach and critical methods which typically lie outside of economics and philosophy. They should remain wary, however, of using such methods divorced from the philosophical foundations which Sen, Nussbaum, and others like Crocker, Drydyk, Alkire, and Robeyns have long sought to build.

Karie Cross © 2017
Department of Political Science, University of Notre Dame, USA
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19452829.2017.1284949

After Access: Inclusion, Development, and a More Mobile Internet
Edited by Johnathan Donner

Aided by the increasing availability of internet-enabled low-cost mobile phones, recent years have witnessed rapid growth in internet access – especially in low- and middle-income countries. As the constraint of availability vanishes, new questions emerge relating to how people engage with the (mobile) internet. This is the subject of Jonathan Donner’s latest book After Access, which documents and analyses the current state of mobile internet usage around the world. His global scope, analysis of the implications of internet use for livelihoods and participation, and interest in digital divides speak to the broader development community as well as to the specific disciplines of mobile communication studies and information and communication technologies and development (or “ICTD”).

Donner makes two main arguments. First, an increasingly mobile internet broadens the space of people’s information consumption and production, while augmenting their experience of the local environment at the same time. Second, the engagement with the mobile internet is also subject to frictions that can reinforce existing differences and produce new divides in online consumption, production, and visibility. These systematic differences