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**Amartya Sen, social theorizing
and contemporary India**

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"in our heterogeneity and in our openness lies our pride, not our disgrace" (Sen 2005a: 138)

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Table of Contents

Abstract

The work of economist and philosopher Amartya Sen (1933-) has attracted attention in other fields too, including in political science, human geography, planning, health and social policy, and, to a lesser but growing extent, in sociology and occasionally anthropology. This paper, written as part of a project on Indian social theorists, discusses Sen's relation to social theorizing. While he is not a 'social theorist' in the sense recognized in sociology and anthropology, being grounded instead in the earlier perspectives of Adam Smith, Condorcet and J.S. Mill, much of his work, both theoretical and empirical, proves of interest to a wide range of social scientists. The paper's first main part outlines his contributions as a social analyst, under four connected headings: (1) theorization on how people reason as agents within society; (2) 'entitlements analysis' of the social determinants of people's access or lack of access to goods; (3) theorizing the effective freedoms and agency that people enjoy or lack, in his 'capability approach' (CA); (4) treatments of societal membership, identity and political life, including a liberal theory of personal identity and a strong advocacy of and high expectations for 'voice' and deliberative democracy. The second part characterizes Sen's intellectual style, marked by systematic conceptual refinement, associated emphases on complexity, heterogeneity, and individuality, including personal individuality, and a reformist optimism. The third part treats his relation to 'social theory' as considered by sociologists, including the connections, contributions and possible blind spots: in his attention to work by sociologists, in his system for theorizing human action in society, in treatment of power structures and capitalism, and in his optimistic programmatic conception of personhood that stresses the freedom to make a reasoned composition of personal identity. The final substantial part discusses his preoccupation with public reasoning and democracy, and the focus on an arguably idealized version of the former and relative neglect of the sociology of the latter. It contrasts the ideal of a reasoning polity with features and trends in independent India. Nevertheless, Sen's programmes for critical autonomy in personhood and for reasoned politics carry significant normative force, and his analytical formats can help not only structured evaluation but investigation of obstacles to more widespread agency, voice and democratic participation.

Keywords

Amartya Sen, social theorizing and contemporary India

1 Introduction – a philosopher-economist who brings many tools

This paper discusses the work of Amartya Sen viewed as a social theorist.[1] He is an outlier in this regard, as a famous economist and philosopher who is a wide-ranging, acute, independent social commentator but not part of the disciplinary streams of sociology or anthropology. Sen works as an inter-disciplinary philosopher-economist who has comprehensively reconnected economics and ethics (e.g., Sen 1987). Economics requires close partnership with ethics, for discussions on the ranking of alternative possible processes, pathways and outcomes but also for understanding behaviour, since people use and are influenced by ethical ideas. Sen engages too with epistemology and the philosophy of mind, and has used his various tools to focus economic analysis on the lives of real, diverse individuals, the interweaving factors that affect and constrain them, and how far people can and do achieve what they (reasonably could) consider important.

His work has not aimed directly to contribute to the traditions of Western 'social theory' that have developed since the mid-19th century (Callinicos 2007; Mouzelis 2008). He can be better understood as participating in projects of normatively oriented social economics, moral philosophy and political theory that build from other and older bases, including the work of Adam Smith (1723-90), the Marquis de Condorcet (1743-94) and John Stuart Mill (1806-73) (see, e.g., Duncan 1973, Gordon 1991). He has contributed towards a humanized and partly socialized economics, and a vision of a reasoning polity inspired by the Millian notion of democracy as 'government by discussion'. Correspondingly, his foremost contemporary intellectual sparring-partners have been the economist Kenneth Arrow (1921-2017) and the philosopher John Rawls (1921-2002).

Central in Sen's work has been the 'social choice' perspective that extends Condorcet and Arrow. It focuses on "methods of marshalling information, particularly those relating to the people involved, to arrive at correct social judgments or acceptable group decisions" (Sen 1986: 1073). We can ask: does this normative 'social choice theory' contain much 'social theory'? [2] Its theorizing, centred like Smith's on a model of reflective individuals, needs deepened pictures of 'the individual' and of culture, to better understand politics, including for example crowds or populism. Even so, Sen has moved

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[2] Sen's magnum opus in social choice theory (2017a) does not refer to sociologists. Seabright (1989) is one of the few discussions on 'Social Choice and Social Theories' but concerns normative theories, not what sociologists understand as 'social theory'.

far beyond a simple conception of persons as traditionally held in economics. He is as interested in the Smith of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1790) as in the bastardized Smith who became patron-saint of free-markets theory. His focus has until recently remained though on influencing fellow economists and philosophers, and his links to sociology, anthropology, psychology and other social theory have been much thinner (see, e.g., his interview by Richard Swedberg – Sen 1990a; and Holmwood 2013). So, while upgrading parts of economists' typically inadequate picture of persons—by for example introducing a category of 'commitment' towards the welfare of others or general causes, investigating the complexity of identity, and emphasising intra-family disaggregation by gender—he has sometimes retained other parts of the limited conceptions of people and society in mainstream economics (Gasper 2000, 2007a, 2009). Use of a very different picture of persons and agency could have lost much of his economics audience. The orientation had a price in the types of questions and methods he engaged with (see, e.g., Gasper 1997, 2002, Gasper & van Staveren 2003). However, the picture has continued to be refined and extended, both by Sen and by some of his associates.

Sen's work has aroused interest among a considerable number of co-operators from other disciplines. Especially his capability approach has been an ongoing focus for attempts at enrichment by authors who seek to partner it with deeper analyses of agency, culture and personhood, drawing for example from Dewey (e.g., Kramm 2019, Zimmermann 2006, 2018), Durkheim and Parsons (Gangas 2020) or Bourdieu (e.g., Hart 2013, Pham 2019). And, second, in recent years Sen himself has published books of social analysis (2005a, 2006, 2015) addressed to general audiences but dealing deeply with issues of identity, identification, democracy and the meaning of 'India'. We can consider how far these books strengthen his treatment of persons in society and how far his methods are likely to engage particular social science audiences.

Born in Santiniketan in 1933, brought up initially in East Bengal and Burma, and educated in Dhaka and Santiniketan, Sen subsequently studied economics at Presidency College, Calcutta and Trinity College, Cambridge. After teaching economics in Cambridge, Calcutta and Delhi, he returned to Britain in 1971 and worked at the London School of Economics and the University of Oxford. Since 1987 he has been a professor in economics and philosophy at Harvard University in the USA, and also spent 1998 to 2004 as Master of his old Cambridge college in Britain. In 1998 he received the Nobel Prize for Economics and in 1999 the Bharat Ratna. He remains an Indian citizen and spends considerable time in India each year. Apart from regular analyses of Indian issues and materials in his work on development economics, public health, hunger and well-being, he has published several books specifically on India (Sen 2005a, 2015; Drèze & Sen 1995, 2002, 2013).

Sen has been remarkably prolific for extraordinarily long, around sixty years. The present paper addresses only selected aspects, without space for most of his towering work in normative theory and extensive contributions on

economic development.[3] Nor can it say much on how his ideas have evolved; we will note though an increasingly ambitious picture of persons, as actors who should be free to define their own identity. The first part notes some of his major contributions as a social analyst, under four headings: as a positive social economist who has illuminated, first, how people reason as agents within society, and, second, many of the social determinants of people's access or lack of access to goods (in his 'entitlements analysis'); third, as a normative social economist and ethical theorist, who has used concepts of 'capability' and 'agency' to further explore the effective freedoms that people enjoy or lack; and, fourth, as a social and political philosopher who discusses personhood as multi-dimensional, stresses the freedom to make a reasoned composition of personal identity, and champions open deliberative democracy. The chapter's second part then characterizes his intellectual style, marked by insistent conceptual refinement and analytical precision and associated emphases on the significance of complexity, heterogeneity, and individuality. The third part treats his relation to social theory, including connections, contributions and a set of possible important blind spots: in his attention to sociology, to theorizing human action in society, to power systems and capitalism, and in his optimistic programmatic conception of personhood. Arising from this, the fourth and final major part discusses his preoccupation with public reasoning and democracy, and the focus on an arguably idealized version of the former and relative neglect of the sociology of the latter. It contrasts the ideal of a reasoning polity with some features and trends in independent India. Nevertheless, Sen's programmes for critical autonomy in personhood and for reasoned politics carry substantial normative force.

Whatever limitations any of Sen's formulations might have, many are widely found useable and useful—even inspirational—intellectual tools, open for partnering other tools and theories, by a range of researchers and actors across various fields, including in diverse spaces in sociology, social policy (including health and disability studies), education, governance and planning, technology studies, and development studies more generally. Their potentials and contributions are emergent and far from yet completed.

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[3] For fuller exposition and assessment of some of Sen's work in normative theory and analyses of personhood, freedom, well-being and politics, see e.g. Gasper (2002, 2007a, 2007b, 2009).

2   Some fields of major contribution

I highlight here four major fields of contribution relevant for social theory. The first concerns how people reason, considering them as social actors. The second field contains analyses of who gets what in society, which Sen extends beyond the conventional frames in economics, in his 'entitlements approach' and associated gender-oriented analyses. The third covers theorizing on human freedom, in his 'capability approach' and his emphases on human agency and 'voice'. The last field contains his treatments of societal membership, citizenship and political life, including a liberal theory of personal identity and a strong advocacy of and high expectations for 'voice' and deliberative democracy. These fields interconnect and are applied together, as seen in most of Sen's major works, such as *The Idea of Justice* (2009).

2.1   How people reason about choices – humanizing economics I

Sen became famous from the 1970s, through showing the absurd narrowness of so-called Rational Choice Theory (Sen 1977, 1985a). This asserted that only one type of choice (maximizing/optimizing, typically in terms only of self-interest) was rational, as opposed to understanding rationality as choice on the basis of reasoning that one can sustain in the face of critical scrutiny (Sen 2009: 180). "Rationality is an exercise of reasoning, valuation, and choice, not a fixed formula with a pre-specified maximand" (Rothschild & Sen 2006: 358). Identifying the type of reasoning which is appropriate in a situation itself requires justifiable reasoning.[4] Several elements of this enriched conceptualisation of choice and reasoning deserve mention.

First, Sen (1980/1) emphasised that there are many types of 'utility', though he has perhaps not always applied this insight (Gasper 2002: 450; 2007a: 73-4). Underlying complexity of thought and affect are the complexity of evolution, of biographies and of daily experience. Economists from Bentham's time onwards had mostly asserted that there is only one utility type, i.e. all experiences are commensurable (can be rated and compared on a single scale). This was for the convenience of being able to conduct a widranging calculus for each person and across persons. Second, Sen clarified how non-commensurability is not only routine in life but different from non-comparability (e.g., 2009: 241); people are frequently able to adequately compare and choose between things that are not commensurable, so Bentham's motivation was anyway partly misplaced. Third, later economists had taken fright at the potential radical redistributive implications that Bentham's calculus could generate and had declared that "interpersonal

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[4] However, when Sen argues that "The remedy for bad reasoning lies in better reasoning" (2009: 49), we should be careful. Sometimes reasoning will lead us to conclude that reasoning is a bad method for task T.

comparison of utilities has no meaning" (Arrow 1951: 9). But just as we hourly make comparisons of the non-commensurable, so we make interpersonal comparisons during every social interaction (Sen 2009: 278). That economists could for so long adopt the nonsensical claim repeated by Arrow reflects, fourth, the social moulding of people's thoughts.

So, fourth, people's ideas, including their preferences are not formed and fixed outside society. Sen makes much use of the notion of 'adaptive preference', as one reason for not considering preference-fulfilment as an overriding or first-ranking normative criterion. The concept of adaptive preferences covers how one's thinking adapts to normalize one's situation; privileged people can become blind to their privileges or consider them only normal, and disadvantaged people may sometimes count only their blessings, not their deprivations.[5] Much of this adaptation involves internalization of social norms, such as the belief that girls require fewer opportunities than boys. Followers of Sen and Nussbaum have developed the counter-concept of 'capability to aspire' (e.g., Walker 2007, Hart 2013), which modulates Arjun Appadurai (2004)'s notion of 'capacity to aspire', seeing it as a meta-capability that underpins most specific capabilities.

Fifth, while people internalize many social norms, norms operate in various ways. Respecting other people's goals, to a considerable extent, is a social norm of good behaviour; it does not mean to change one's own goals and adopt those of the others (Sen 2007b; 2009: 193).

Sixth, related to that but involving more too, people (usually) do not reason only in terms of personal self-interest. They also commit to social ideals, including through personal reflection not only socialization. Correspondingly, Kautilya's stress on only carrots and sticks was one-sided, although Ashoka's extreme hopes for reform through sermons and dialogue was overenthusiastic too (Sen 2009: 76-77). Adam Smith (1790) had distinguished, first, sympathy, where one feels for/with others, e.g. feels better when they prosper; second, generosity, where one sacrifices some of one's well-being for known others; and third, public spirit, where one sacrifices for a wider group, by adopting the standpoint of the nation. Sen from the 1970s advanced the concept of 'commitment', which spans Smith's 'generosity' and 'public spirit'. He acknowledges now that Smith's distinctions were more refined (Sen 2009: 185; 188fn.), but has also extended them, adding the cosmopolitan spirit of human rights, not confined by national boundaries. As an example of the influence in economic decision-making of public spirit and 'non-economic' factors like ideas of national loyalty, he notes how British capital had stayed away from investing in Indian textiles and iron-and-steel during the era in which Britain exported heavily to India in those sectors. As a conscious reaction, the Tata family dynasty chose out of many possible sectors

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[5] Zimmermann (2018: 940-1) offers an example: "our inquiry into training capabilities shows that the employees who were most deprived of access to vocational training were paradoxically those – all other factors being equal – who were least likely to express any discontent regarding a perceived lack of training or to express any desire for such (Lambert et al., 2012)."

to invest first in cotton textiles, and then around 1905, far less obviously, to go for iron-and-steel (Sen 2005a). Clearly though, much more remains to be said about the types of values and emotions that can be involved in people's choices within society (e.g.: Durkheim 1893; Nussbaum 2013; Gangas 2020, Ch.5).

Seventh, Sen neither stands the person outside society nor merges the person into society. His notion of positional objectivity highlights the cognitive independence but specific location of each observer, though not the social moulding of cognition. 'Positional objectivity' refers to when different observers have the same perception when viewing from the same observational position, while allowing that their perceptions can differ when the observational positions differ. This position-based comprehension often leads to biases concerning issues where we need transpositional understanding (Sen 2009: 162-3). Such biases can sometimes be overcome, though not always fully.

Much of this enriched conceptualisation can be seen as basic social theory that had become suppressed in modern economics. ("Economists discover the power of social norms to influence decisions", proudly declared a headline in *The Economist* newspaper, as of 8th February 2020; p.62.) Drawing on reflective philosophers and social economists, from Buddha and Aristotle through Smith to J.S. Mill, Sen helped to (re-)introduce such distinctions into formal economics. His discussion of reasoning, norms, 'commitment' and objectivity continues in the same philosophical style as these predecessors, without much reference to evidence from modern psychology on the thought processes, the accompanying emotions, their evolutionary basis or so on (unlike, e.g., van Staveren 2001).[6] The limited engagement with psychology is perhaps seen in his claim that rationality does not require non-self-interested motivations (e.g., 2009: 194). While correct as a clarification of formally stipulated concepts, and for computers, it is perhaps questionable as an empirical claim for humans, for example because our positional biases become more extreme when not balanced by the broader attention and learning that arise from sympathy, generosity and public spirit.[7] Extreme cases of positional bias can be found throughout history in regard to many perceptions of, for example, famines and hunger.

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[6] Similarly, Sen's remarks on needs theory (e.g., 2013; 2017a: 25, 478) do not connect to the needs literatures in psychology and social policy. Where he does connect to psychology, he does not always recognise it as such. He refers to "Scitovsky's analysis—part economic, part sociological—of 'the joyless economy'" (2009: 273); but Scitovsky (1976/1992) was grounded more in psychology and brain sciences research than in sociology.

[7] Similarly, Sen (2007a) on "Why Exactly is Commitment Important for Rationality?" does not address the psychology of self and reasoning.

2.2 Entitlements analysis – socializing economics

Entitlements analysis, "a socially disaggregated, institutionally aware, analysis of effective command over specific necessities" (Gasper 1993: 679), grew out of Sen's work on explanation of famines (1981) and became applied to investigate hunger and poverty more generally (Drèze & Sen 1989; Gasper 1993). The entitlements approach generated a framework for identifying possible policy responses including through diverse forms of 'public action': action in the public sphere not only action by governments. This was extended in later work on human development (e.g., Drèze & Sen 2002) and human security (see e.g. Gasper & Gomez 2014) that gives systematic attention to multiple lines of vulnerability.

Sen placed in context the emphasis on social relativity of poverty that was found in much theorizing in rich countries, by underlining the reality of absolute poverty such as seen in famines. At the same time his analysis of famines took a socially disaggregated view of this absolute poverty. During the huge Bengal famine of 1943-44, in which two to three million people died prematurely, there was adequate aggregate food availability and most people in Bengal suffered little or no extra hardship; but due to wartime-related policies, restrictions and market shifts, certain groups such as landless labourers, rural artisans and fisherpeople lost the ability to command sufficient food via markets and had no or insufficient other access. They lacked 'entitlements', socially enforceable claims. Entitlements analysis studies effective or legitimate command over goods, and its various channels and determinants, including attention to the rules and institutions that control access, and to the distinctive positions and vulnerabilities of different groups. It shows the centrality of enforceable rights and thus of power (Gasper 1993). "… this approach compels us to take a broad view of the ways in which access to food can be protected or promoted, including reforms of the legal framework within which economic relations take place" (Drèze & Sen 1989: 24).

Characteristic of the entitlements approach is to distinguish many social groups, including not only in terms of income or economic class but also by occupation, gender, and more. Sen's gender-differentiated study of intra-household distribution led to dramatic analyses of differential mortality, highlighting tens of millions of "Missing Women" (Sen 1990b). It led also to his model of "cooperative conflicts" (Sen 2004a), which considers women's situations within households and their possible strategies. Many researchers followed up this work on how women's well-being depends on intra-household negotiations that reflect how far they neglect their own well-being for the rest of the household, their degree of economic (in)dependence, the culturally-relative perceptions of what is a contribution, and how far they are subject to intimidation (Sen 1984, 2004a; Gasper 1993).

This attention to social differentiation, beyond what had been normal in economics theory and practice, and to the institutionalized social norms that mould entitlements, gives channels for enriching economics with social theory. Claims and allocations are understood as arising within a society and polity, not only an economy (Gasper 2000). Sen's capability approach and his theory of

reasoning add a greater agency-orientation, but within this awareness of social constraints.

2.3 The capability approach – humanizing economics II

Building on the study of who gets what, Sen has explored who can live (or die) how, with reference to what are the elements of human lives and what human meanings they carry. This work has potential for enriching social theory itself (Gangas 2020). Sen critiqued conventional welfare economics[8] that is based on ideas of individual preferences and of their fulfilment through the holding of economic goods, and offered a reconstruction: including in his capability approach (CA) and associated re-conceptualizations of well-being, poverty, inequality (asking "Inequality of what?"), equity, and development (e.g., Sen 1982, 1984, 2009). The CA recognises numerous determinants of well-being besides income or resources or formal rights and shows how misleading or insufficient each of those can therefore be as indicator, just as can felt satisfactions. It stresses, for example, variation across persons in ability to convert income or resources or formal rights into valued 'functionings' (meaning 'beings and doings'), due to: 1. personal heterogeneities that give people different needs; 2. diversities in physical environment; 3. variations in social facilities (e.g., health systems, education systems, policing systems); and 4. differences in norms and approved patterns of relating within a society.[9]

Capability and entitlements analyses thus situate people as social actors who live in social structures with roles and constraints, and who are subject often to adaptive preferences and using over-narrow informational bases of judgement (Kremakova 2013). The 'capability' term was perhaps originally attached to 'well-being freedom', the extent of reasoningly valued life-outcomes that a person can attain for herself (Sen 1985b: 13-14), related to the concerns in study of hunger; but the sister category of 'agency freedom' was also present, which refers more broadly to the extent that the person can fulfil her (reasoned) values, regardless of whom or what these address. 'Well-being achievement' and 'agency achievement' refer to the actual attainments. The whole approach continues though to be called 'the capability approach', and usage of 'capability' seems over time to have fully encompassed agency too; for example, the emergent term 'capability for voice' (ability to form and publicly express an opinion; Bonvin 2008) links strongly to most people's conception of 'agency'.

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[8] Welfare economics: the concepts and theories in economics about when we can say that people and societies have become better or worse placed.

[9] Zimmerman (2018: 944) traces Sen's derivation of the term 'capability' back to his reading of John Dewey (1859-1952), who distinguished a capacity (skill) to do something from a capability of doing so. Dewey noted that the latter depends also on the person's environment (1891: 98). This might help to understand why Sen's oft-repeated list of sources of variation in capability across persons (i.e., of differential 'conversion factors'; Sen 1999a: 70-1, 88-90; 2009: 255; 2017a: 25) perhaps oddly excludes differences in skills despite his stress on agency.

The capability concept reflects a concern with reasoned freedom not only actual activities, and the importance of having both choices and effective power to attain desired outcomes (Zimmermann 2018). John Davis suggests that "the concept that ties his entire capability framework together—freedom (cf. especially Sen 1999a)—has no real equivalent in neoclassical and mainstream economics. In fact, his focus on freedom provides a normative framework alternative to efficiency analysis" (Davis 2003: 152). Sen has sought to recapture the potent 'freedom' concept, not leave it to Milton Friedman, Robert Nozick or Subramaniam Swamy. He expresses his conception as follows:

> [U]ltimately we have to see poverty as unfreedoms of various sorts: the lack of freedom to achieve even minimally satisfactory living conditions. Low income can certainly contribute to that, but so can a number of other influences, such as the lack of schools, absence of health facilities, unavailability of medicines, the subjugation of women, hazardous environmental features, lack of jobs (something that affects more than the earning of incomes). Poverty can be reduced through expanding these facilities, but in order to guarantee that, what is needed is an enhancement of the power of people, especially of the afflicted people, to make sure that the facilities are expanded and the deficiencies removed.
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> People remain unempowered as a result of a variety of complex processes. ... Quiet acceptance – by the victims and by others – of the inability of a great many people to achieve minimally effective capabilities and to have basic substantive freedoms ... We have to see how the actions and inactions of a great many persons together lead to this social evil, ... [and how] the remedy too can come from the co-operative efforts of people at large. ... 'active citizenship' can be a very effective way of seeking and securing solutions to these pervasive problems of powerlessness and unfreedom. (Sen 2012: ix-x).[10]

Capability analysis thus brings attention to a wide range of values, for a differentiated variety of persons; indeed, in principle for each person, since each has to some extent a unique combination of circumstances and concerns. Further, it provides not only "a critical [evaluative] yardstick against which to assess the social world, its structuring principles and individual effects. As a descriptive concept broken down into a series of items suited for empirical inquiry – opportunities, resources, entitlements, conversion factors, achievements", it structures a research programme "for an understanding of the mechanism[s] underpinning [or inhibiting] individual agency" (Zimmermann 2018: 942; my additions). These features lead Gangas (2014, 2020) to argue that, for example, the concept of capability deprivation provides a more refined, flexible empirical research programme for understanding the multi-dimensional idea of 'alienation' than do the now overextended and

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[10] Sen's adoption here of the phrase 'active citizenship' follows the usage in the book he was introducing (Duncan Green's 'From Poverty to Power'). It is worth considering, though, whether here and often elsewhere Sen says more about the powerless than about powerholders and power-systems.

insufficiently specified usages of that term in contemporary sociological theories.

Gangas argues similarly in relation to 'agency': "[CA] offers powerful concepts that can enable sociologists to rebuild the category of agency. … [For] the normative components of Sen's notion of capabilities are not necessarily locked into an individualist approach to agency, typical of economic thought, but, rather, contain a social core that has been prefigured primarily by Parsons and to a lesser extent by Giddens" (Gangas 2020: 9). Giddens (1984) defined agency as the "capability to act". Talcott Parsons stressed 'capacity' as central in his theory of action in society and as a condition for achieving real citizenship. His "vision of capacity, no matter how abstractly formulated, can be viably likened to the normative program of capabilities, aiming at a social self, free of major deprivations and sufferings" (Gangas 2016: 34). Gangas indicates how Sen's description of agency goes further, for example through his attention to information availability and thus to how far agents can compare current arrangements with other possibilities and decide whether the arrangements may require amendment or rejection. "Sen's idea of capability can render concrete the abstractions entailed in these two [viz., Parsons, Giddens] formulations of agency" (Gangas 2016: 33); partly because Sen focuses on specific issues such as morbidity, mortality, education, voting and employment, and provides more plentiful and more operational concepts for discussing what influences their occurrence. Many capability theorists have now explored agency much further, but the CA project can in turn be strengthened by connection to Parsons: to his exploration of the institutional infrastructures needed for personal capacity (Gangas 2020: 124) and his "mapping of the normative patterns which amplify [or inhibit] actors' capabilities to choose the lifestyle(s) they have reason to value" (Gangas 2016: 35; my addition).

2.4   Democracy and the reasoning citizen – an ethics of politics and public life

Lastly, Sen has been a theorist and champion of democracy in general and deliberative democracy in particular. His style has been in many ways more concrete, pragmatic and policy-relevant than, for example, that of Jürgen Habermas (Gangas 2020). Much of *The Argumentative Indian* (Sen 2005a) is about 'voice', Albert Hirschman (1970)'s more political partner-notion to 'agency'. Voice reinforces and relies on agency. The empowered active citizen demands, negotiates and helps to construct effective entitlements.

Connected to his picture of public reasoning is an advocacy of how participants in public arenas should see themselves. Compared to the conceptualization of identity as unity-in-diversity, favoured by for example Nehru, Sen (2006) has advanced a related but different framework, to advocate a person's recognition of his/her plural affiliations plus a reasoned individuality. It reflects a strong liberal insistence on seeing people as "persons with the 'capacity to act and the freedom to choose,' [DG: including in respect to their self-description,] rather than being reduced to simplified categories,

15

such as [only] workers, unemployed, mothers, etc. (e.g. Sen 1999a: 295-296)" (Kremakova 2013: 398).

In later sections I will comment on Sen's work in the last two of the fields that have now been introduced: the capability approach and democracy.[11] There is already much secondary literature on that work, so before essaying further commentary let us look at some matters that have been less extensively discussed, regarding his intellectual style in approaching social theorizing. Sen is, simultaneously, a wide-ranging economic theorist, practical policy analyst, an incisive analytical philosopher who is profoundly aware of the imperfections of analytical schema, and a learned cultural and intellectual historian and observer of India. The attempt to characterize his intellectual style will, I hope, help the later comments to go deeper.

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[11] Since some pieces already discuss Sen's preoccupation with freedom (e.g., Gasper 2002, 2007a, Gasper & van Staveren 2003), I here explore other aspects and treat that preoccupation instead via its embodiment in the capability approach.

3 Sen's approach – some characteristics

Some of Sen's traits are those of the skilled economist, such as an orientation to making wide-ranging comparisons and to tracing unforeseen effects.[12] His sustained comparisons between India and China, between different regions in India and China, and between India or Indian regions and Bangladesh, step outside a myopic national frame. Less standard amongst economists and philosophers are his effective balancing of theorization, investigation of cases, and the practical requirements of policy analysis. He examines vivid real cases in depth, like communal violence and the 1940s Bengal Famine in which millions died while food was available, to engage readers and colleagues, inform thought and build more realistic theory and policy analyses. Most distinctive though, and perhaps hardly surpassed amongst social scientists, are the skills he brings as an analytical philosopher, combined yet with a strong humanistic and literary sensitivity.

3.1 Dissector of concepts

Sen's work, in field after field, nearly always involves patient and incisive conceptual examination. His priority to conceptual clarification does not involve stipulative simplifications. He often stresses the limits of attempted formal definitions and the need to recognise irremovable degrees of ambiguity. He endorses, for example, Paul Farmer's procedure (2005) of ostensive definition of power, social structures and violence, relying on multiple illustrations more than explicit verbal specification.

Besides his famous demonstrations of the complexity of some notions in political philosophy like 'equality' and 'freedom' (e.g., Sen 1982, 2009), *The Argumentative Indian* (2005a) dissects many significant terms in social theory, including 'modernity', 'secularism', 'Hinduism', 'India', and 'the world'; and also 'identity', which he pursues at greater length in *Identity and Violence* (2006). The concept 'modernity' is shown to be highly multidimensional and with no obvious simple meaning (Sen 2005a: 313); correspondingly, talk on 'post-modernity' is often confused and opportunistic. The concept 'secularism' means non-discrimination between religions but has very diverse variants according to the degree of closeness or distance, support or indifference, given equally to religions by a State. Ashish Nandy's anti-secularism arguments struggle under such examination (Sen 2005a, Ch.14).

Against any reductionist picture of 'the' Hindu tradition, Sen presents its enormous variations, heterogeneity, and recency as a category (2005a: 310). He cites the conception of "the basic Hindu approach" (Sen 2005a: 46) in a standard book by his grandfather (K.M. Sen 1961) but that conception was the

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[12] E.g., the discussion of "friendly fire" in Sen's "Class in India" (2005a, Ch.10), on how schemes intended/declared to help the poor frequently ignore the real poor and may even worsen their situation.

opposite of reductionist; it emphasised "an overarching liberality" (Sen 2005a: 46), catholicity and acceptance of heterodoxy (p.12). He contrasts this with "the drastically down-sized Hinduism that tends to receive the patronage of the Hindutva movement" (p.74).

The concept of 'India' receives a similar analysis, given the huge variations within Indian thinking, society and culture. Sen distinguishes India and Hinduism – India is older than Hinduism and Hinduism comes substantially from outside India (2005a: 66). Further, within India 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' cultures are profoundly overlapping and interpenetrated (pp. 315-6), and cultures are far more than only their religious strands. So he rejects "The Smallness Thrust Upon Us" (Sen 2015, Ch.3) in both the small picture of India as overwhelmingly Hindu and the small picture of Hinduism (2005a: 83). Instead, India is seen, as by Tagore or Nehru, as a confluence of many religions and streams (p.118).

Likewise, in conceptualising the world, Sen suggests the fatuity and danger of Samuel Huntington (1996)'s partition of humanity into eight 'civilizations' that are presumed to be (i) primarily defined by religious tradition, (ii) fundamentally different, (iii) mutually antagonistic and (iv) unable to effectively communicate and co-deliberate (2005a: Chs. 8, 13). Huntington's inadequate approach to societies links, Sen considers, to an inadequate approach to conceptualizing persons.

3.2   Deconstructor/reconstructor of the person and personal identities

Sen has deconstructed the economics notion of the rational individual and distinguished as we saw between self-interest, 'sympathy' (enjoyment from the welfare of others), and 'commitment' (valuing that welfare despite not gaining enjoyment from it; Sen 1982, 1984), often as a part of sharing group memberships. He added awareness of plurality within the self, including through the idea of metapreferences: preferences about preferences.[13] This idea involves not merely a further sort of preference, but a move beyond considering preferences as exogenous. Instead, people have some capacity to reflect on, reason about, assess and modify their preferences (Davis 2007). Davis links this picture, of persons as reasoners about preferences, to Sen's view of people as reasoners about their various actual/potential elements of social affiliation and identity; and connects that in turn to Sen's concept of 'commitment', "an act in which individuals freely self-constrain themselves to others" (Davis 2007: 329).

Sen does not, according to Davis (2003: 66), go further to think about the different mental frames and 'utility functions' corresponding to a person's different social roles; but he explicitly rejects economics' frequent "identity disregard", the presumption that people are purely individuals with independently given preferences and have no "sense of identity with anyone

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[13] For example, a preference to not have one's preference for smoking.

other than themselves" or give little attention to it (Sen 2006: 20). Besides the common economics picture of unsocialized individuals, he rejects also an overemphatically sociological picture of totally socialized individuals who bear a single socially given identity. Varieties of communitarian thought where people are supposedly members of just one basic group (2006: 177) have frequently been disastrously reductionist.

In *Identity and Violence* (2006) Sen argues against classification of people primarily, even exclusively, in terms of a single social identity, whether within a country or across countries, say as 'Hindu' or 'Indian'. He calls such a picture of "singular affiliation" (p.20) the "solitarist illusion" (p.82), namely the "illusion of a unique and choiceless identity" (p.xv). It is fallacious for many reasons: including that cultures are not monolithic and that people exist as intersections of many cultural streams. Huntington-style identification in terms of religious tradition downgrades non-religious aspects of identity, as the British did in India. Such classification is dangerous as well as wrong; for each stipulated group it hands power to a particular elite that claims, seizes or is given authority over all supposed members of the supposed religious community.

The prevailing characterisations of Huntington-esque supposed civilisational package-deals (e.g., equating 'Europe' or 'the West' to democracy) are often laughably ignorant and racist (Sen 2006, Ch.3). Democracy is not specific to Europe, nor predominant in European history; nor has Europe only given and not received in this respect. Unfortunately, dichotomisation is sometimes sustained also by post-colonial reactivity in the self-characterisations in the South/East, that affirm 'we are fundamentally different' from the North/West (2006, Ch.5). The future of global cooperation relies on our not seeing people in such simplistic identity-boxes, but instead on our recognising multiple commonalities. "Culture, after all, is more than mere geography" (2004b: 55) or than religion alone.

There is no single proper way of grouping people, since we have multiple relevant characteristics, and deciding which ones are most relevant in a specific context must be reasoned out in that context. One senses that Sen learns here from his own complex geographical and intellectual life-trajectory. Such reasoning and choice are central in leading a human life (2006: xiii), for considering what are one's relevant identities and in weighing them (pp. 24, 38). We do not merely 'recognise' who we are, for notwithstanding our cultural inheritances we have choices in self-identification (pp. 30, 35-6). Similarly, a real multiculturalism is more than merely the coexistence of several fixed monoculturalisms (p.156). It involves people's cultural freedom, ability to learn and select from multiple cultures, make reasoned informed choices (pp. 114, 150), and live examined lives (p.160)

The Argumentative Indian (2005a) applies such arguments specifically to India. It objects to the predominant classification of people by primarily just one dimension, say their recorded religion (Hindu/Moslem/...), especially when done regardless of whether the people classified as say Hindu profess Hinduism or give it definitional priority. After people are counted as Hindus using one definition of Hinduism (i.e., what was stated on a birth certificate),

this is used to define a supposed "community" (p.53); and then, further, a Hindutva government may act as if all those who were so counted support a different specification of Hinduism which includes many beliefs that are far from unanimously shared (pp. 354-5).

Sen calls for people to be able to categorize themselves rather than be pigeonholed from birth (2005a: 55). For we are not bacteria or ants, near-identical programmed 'robots'. He admits that choice of identity is constrained but insists that virtually all people have significant degrees of choice (2005a: 351); and that the reflective choice of which aspects of one's plural identity to highlight in a particular context is a key aspect of human freedom. He holds that failure to understand this plurality and responsibility is a major cause of conflicts. What many people and some communitarian theorists consider authenticity Sen identifies as failure. His phrase regarding India, that "in our heterogeneity and in our openness lies our pride, not our disgrace" (Sen 2005a: 138), applies also to within each person, as well as to scientific endeavours. "Community membership is taken as instrumental, not central, to being" (Gasper 2002: 452).

Sen presents the choices by individuals in characterizing themselves, in the same fashion as he presents choices by analysts in categorizing persons—as an exercise in philosophical reflection. Yet if many of the different relevant components of identity come as social memberships, then they come with social expectations and pressures and as outcomes of socialization. As we will discuss later, his picture of self-characterizing individuals may sometimes be more programmatic than descriptive, an exercise also in liberal assertion. To Gangas (2020: 22), Sen like Nussbaum considers "pluralism [as] both an irreducible aspect of reality and, as it turns out, a value."

3.3   Explorer of complexity, heterogeneity, diversity, intersectionality – and advocate of liberal hope

Sen's insistence on complex conceptualisation leads to stresses on heterogeneity, diversity, intersectionality, and on "description as choice" (Sen 1982, Ch.20). We saw that entitlements analysis and capability analysis look not at 'the social actor/subject' or even 'the worker'/'the peasant' but at multi-dimensional real people: gendered, having particular ages and professions and histories and (dis)abilities. Sen insists on using multiple descriptive and explanatory dimensions in analysing a society and rejects preoccupation with say economic class alone (2005a: Ch.10, "Class in India"). He characteristically carefully assesses correlations and interconnections between dimensions of disadvantage but considers them insufficiently strong and invariable to justify focus on just one dimension like class. Instead he proposes and undertakes intersectional study of how diverse factors operate jointly, not in isolation (for example, the composite action of caste, religion and class; ibid.).

He stresses the inevitable choices involved in making descriptions of complex multi-dimensional realities. His notions of 'positional objectivity' and 'description as choice' match ideas in pragmatist epistemology and from frame

theory in cognitive psychology. Positional objectivity, we noted, means that from different viewing positions people see differently; description-as-choice reflects that we have choices too in categorisation and about what to include. For example, Sen does not present his emphasis on argumentation and reasoning in Indian history as the only correct picture; instead he appears to consciously emphasise this strand because it has been neglected (in part due to British imperial dominance and its manufacture of reductive stereotypes about India) and because it contributes to a basis for peaceful progress, democracy and secularism (2005a: Preface).

Elsewhere he claims more, though, that "the Indian subcontinent has a particularly strong tradition in recognizing and pursuing a dialogic commitment" (2005a: 75), and highlights for example how Buddhism gave "special importance to discussions and dialogue" (p.81). Both propositions seem somewhat strained, as if Ashoka and Akbar were typical and as if their approaches had prevailed in India. Again and again, in many publications, he returns to the record of Buddhism in India, for its general rationalist commitment, and especially to Ashoka and the ordered open debates in three ancient councils held to discuss Buddhist doctrine (e.g. 2005a: Ch.8). He refers to these councils, held about one per century (in the 5th, 4th and 3rd centuries BC; no agreed historical details have been established), as if they constituted a tradition of public reasoning. It illustrates a further characteristic in his work, that we may call (to use a phrase from his friend, and uncle by marriage, Albert Hirschman) "a bias for hope" (Hirschman 1971).

 Sen stresses agency as well as structure. He readily accepts Marx's formulation in 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon': "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past." But he adds a strong liberal idealist imprint.

Not everyone has Sen's appetite for conceptual clarification and epistemic refinement. Hence not only is his type of social analysis at risk of being a minority pursuit, but the types of people that we need to theorize about include many who are probably somewhat different from those he focuses on. His chosen description seems to reflect a normative vision.

3.4   Public intellectual and gentle persuader

Sen's argumentative style matches his ideal of government by reasoned deliberation: courteous, patient, systematic, interactive.[14] He works as a diplomatic reformer from inside. I have suggested elsewhere that this "preference for gentle persuasion [is] seen in adoption of evocative but ambiguous, politically safe labels and an avoidance of seeking debate on all fronts (e.g. against hyper affluence)" (Gasper 2000: 989). His key terms—

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[14] Gopalkrishna Gandhi's exploration of Sen's style calls it "marsupial" (Gandhi 2015: xvi)—always containing pockets for qualifications and refinements.

'freedom', 'capability', 'agency', 'entitlement'—are memorable, widely appealing, and adapted from the societal mainstream; but relatedly, the labels have quite often induced confusions.[15]

The wide scope, evocative concepts and affable manner have helped Sen's work to interest a remarkable range of readers across the social sciences as well as wider publics and many policy agencies, national and international (such as the UK's Equality and Human Rights Commission and Government Equalities Office, and various corners in the UN and EU systems). Iguiñiz (2002) finds strong commonalities between *Development as Freedom* and Gustavo Gutierrez's *A Theology of Liberation* (1973), while others have remarked on Sen's relative avoidance of 'liberation' or 'empowerment' language despite his insistence that development is a process of extending freedoms (e.g., Hill 2003). "The choice of the imprecise but attractive and politically safe term 'freedom' illustrates a sustained style: cautious boldness, seeking a wide, mainstream audience with terms, tones and topics that will appeal [to] and engage them" (Gasper 2000: 996). Sen has stayed away from strong criticism of opulence and commodity-addiction, perhaps partly because his greatest focus has been on addressing absolute poverty in India; and he does not wish within Indian debates to be typecast and politically marginalized as anti-growth (see Sen 2015: xliii). Nor does he focus on picking out "bad guys" responsible for social ills.[16] Strongly aware of the centrality of mass education and the significance of its neglect in both colonial and democratic India, the closest he comes to class-based criticism is to ascribe this neglect to the British imperial legacy, the continuation of traditional Indian elitism, and "Upper-class-dominated contemporary politics" (2005a: 116). More usually he identifies bad ideas as the "bad guys" and expresses a Millian faith in education and in "government by discussion" (Duncan 1973; Gasper 2009).

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[15] For 'entitlements', for example, see Gasper (1993): "patterns of rights and claims…are complex and vary over time and place, [so] the [entitlements analysis] terms and formats irresistibly evolve beyond Sen's" (p. 698). For 'freedom', see Gasper (2009).

[16] His essay on Satyajit Ray admires how Ray's films eschewed simple identifications of heroes and villains (Sen 2005a, Ch.6).

4 Sen and social theory – possible limitations and some responses

4.1 Sen's relationship to sociology and anthropology

"[T]he capability approach has remained largely unnoticed by sociologists", suggested Kremakova (2013: 394). Several other authors have commented on lack of reference by sociologists to Sen's work; for example Venkataraman (2016) specifically for India. The same may apply amongst anthropologists, with Arjun Appadurai as one exception. As partial explanation, Holmwood noted weakness of the reverse connection too: Sen "makes very few references to sociological research despite it having clear relevance to his interests" (2013: 1171). Even his books on sociological topics (2005a, 2006, 2015) include little reference to sociologists or other social theorists.[17] When he recognises social coordination through norms, as emphasised "in the sociological and anthropological literature" (Sen 2009: 203)—in contrast to through contracts as emphasised in economics and some philosophy—he does not cite any such literature; the only reference is to a political scientist, winner of an economics Nobel Prize, Elinor Ostrom.

Holmwood goes on: "Sen construes sociology as a…supplier of empirical instances to illustrate the argument about capabilities (for example, concerning issues of gender, or disability, as they bear on access to, and distribution of, 'commodities' necessary to realise capabilities)" (2013: 1176); he does not engage sociological theory. So, for example, while "the sociological argument that had the greatest resonance with the research programme being developed by Sen was that of T.H. Marshall [of LSE] and his discussion of social rights of citizenship" (p.1178), Sen never refers to him. The relative lack of interest in Sen from sociologists might also reflect, Holmwood suggests, their heavy preoccupation with economic class. That has led often to relatively low focus (unlike in the social policy field) on the wide variety and diverse incidence of social inequalities that Sen investigates.

Hartley Dean, himself professor of social policy at LSE, spoke though for many readers when assessing the capability approach and Sen's work more widely: "[Capability] is essentially a liberal-individualist concept. Despite its attractions…the `capability approach' obscures or neglects three key realities: [1] the constitutive nature of human interdependency; [2] the problematic nature of the public realm; and [3] the exploitative nature of capitalism. … [An] emancipatory politics of needs interpretation…would be better served by a discourse of rights than a discourse of capabilities." (2009: 261). He adds: "It is

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[17] See, e.g., their indexes. Slightly more frequently mentioned in *The Argumentative Indian* are a few social scientists whom Sen criticises, such as Ashish Nandy from social psychology and Samuel Huntington from political science. His papers on social exclusion (Sen 2000) and culture in development (Sen 2004b) are wider-ranging but still oriented more to institutional economics than to 'social theory'.

not simply that it is *possible* for official national and international agencies to [as one can observe] adopt the language of capabilities while studiously ignoring key drivers of inequality and poverty. For all its attractions, the concept is *in itself* constrained" (p.266; emphases in the original).[18]

In contrast to Dean, various sociologists and other social scientists argue that Sen's capability thinking provides helpful tools in explanation as well as for normative purposes, although it indeed "must be complemented with theories that enable a better understanding of social structure, human sociality, collective living and the meaning of social action, for example within the philosophical traditions of Hannah Arendt and Paul Ricoeur" (Kremakova 2013: 413, referring especially to Deneulin et al. 2006). Further, many have initiated this work of partnering. The capability approach is flexible and evolves, as surveyed recently in for example Gangas's book on Sen and sociological theory (2020). Gangas agrees on "the marked omission of sociology in core principles of CA" (Gangas 2020: 7) and warns that continuation of "the persistent repulsion of sociological theory" (p.13) could leave CA in a dead-end. But he believes the limitations are remediable and worth remedying, for CA's conceptual system expresses a concern with purposeful, just, flourishing human lives and can help to motivate, focus and complement existing sociological theorizing.

Some of Dean's arguments carry weight; some reflect misunderstandings or concern gaps that can be filled. Regarding human interdependency, Dean remarks that "the capability approach to equality is framed in terms of freedom, but not solidarity. … the freedom to choose, not the need to belong" (2009: 267). He suggests that this gives an inadequate understanding of human living. Being, for humans, is constituted by and critically reliant on dependencies, support by others, not only freedoms; humans are vulnerable and needy, not only autonomous agents. Our affiliations to and dependence on others are not merely a route to our own capabilities but "are constitutive of our individual identities and the frameworks of meaning by which we value various functionings" (2009: 268).[19]

Recognition of needs to belong is indeed fuller in the work of Nussbaum, who highlights affiliation as central, than in Sen's. His use of freedoms language can become overextended (Gasper & van Staveren 2003), but by freedoms he explicitly means capabilities to achieve (reasoned) values, which will certainly include numerous affiliations. Nor does he have anything against freedoms which arise from dependencies.[20] His theory of identity highlights the

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[18] One may note though that, whether they use a language of capabilities or human rights or any other, official agencies are always multiply constrained.

[19] Dean remarks that we require a relational ontology of personhood. See, e.g., Gasper & Truong (2010) on how personal autonomy arises out of mutual relations of care.

[20] Holmwood notes that whereas "[for] most liberal writers, the appropriate question is whether institutions appropriately express theoretically established principles of individualism, …for Sen [instead] the issue is whether institutions allow the flourishing of individuals" (2013: 1176). Both institutions and dependencies are essential; the question is, of what sorts and with what results.

multiplicity of our affiliations, but argues that these should be open to reasoned review; and he is aware also of dangers that can arise from the pursuit of needs to belong, including from stereotyping, excluding and victimizing those who are deemed not to belong. He argues that the "presence of individuals who think, choose, and act does not make an approach methodologically individualist; rather, the postulation that the individuals are separated and detached from each other would do that" (Sen 2002: 81). He makes no such postulation, and instead explores many forms of interconnection.

Dean observes further that "our ability at any particular moment to function as we choose may necessarily be achieved at the expense of others' freedom" (2009: 273). This is true, but the equivalent applies also for fulfilment of the need to belong. Every value may conflict sometimes with other values, or with the same value as enjoyed by other people. Sen never proposes that freedoms cannot conflict or that they are the only type of value. The criticisms by Dean regarding capitalism and the public realm do, however, have more strength.

4.2 Links and limitations – and opportunities – in relation to social theory

We noted that Sen's foremost intellectual formation was in 'social choice theory', which despite its name contains little social theory; it is a branch of choice-theory. He has an economist's strong emphases on choice and agency; at the same time his work has always been critical of the simplistic picture of persons in much of economics and politics. So, how far does he consider human sociality, social structure, and people's socially derived mental programming and cognitive and emotional constraints, and what potentials exist then for cooperation with sociologists?

We can better describe a presumed separation and detachment of persons from each other as 'ontological individualism' and reserve the term 'methodological individualism' for analysing from the perspective of individuals. A different line of criticism of individual-centred theorizing may concern then not an alleged lack of awareness of the centrality of affiliations and belonging, but instead an exclusive or excessive reliance on methodological individualism in the sense just mentioned. Gangas, for example, suggests that "although Sen's version of CA offers a promising renewal of the 'embeddedness' argument (Polanyi) its methodological approach over-relies on economics and thus lacks fine-tuning to sociology and in particular to theoretical models that address the problem of market embeddedness in society" (2020: 8). Holmwood concurs. He suggests that Sen has much more influence in analytical philosophy and political science because these disciplines are, like economics, more methodologically individualist than is sociology. Thus we see many PPE degree programmes, very few PPS; and some "welfare economists and social choice theorists have been influential in forming...a kind of social science that was unsympathetic to sociology" (Holmwood 2013: 1173). Sen shares the ideal and preoccupation of Condorcet,

the reasoning society, able to change its behaviour, as opposed to what he considers a Malthusian notion of animal-type societies bound by fixed laws of motion (Sen 2009: 112; and 2017a: Ch. A6). Holmwood proposes though that "[his] approach to markets is similar to that of [the economic sociologist] Polanyi and we might regard the idea of capabilities as giving substance to the latter's idea of 'complex freedom'" (Holmwood 2013: 1183).

As Kremakova notes (2013: 399), besides people's range of *affiliations* Sen is well-aware of various (other) social *influences, interactions, negotiations* and *constraints*. Entitlements analysis and capability theory consider many in detail. Let us unpack 'social constraints', to consider how far this work moves beyond ontological or even methodological individualism. Enthusiasts for Sen's language of freedom and agency are often weak in their attention to *social structures*, argues Andrew Sayer amongst others (e.g., Deneulin 2006). He warns that "[CA's] radical implications are mostly being missed, largely on account of attempts to use its normative theory without an adequate account of the social structures that enable or limit human capabilities in particular situations"; CA has been typically combined with "inadequate theories of society, particularly regarding the external conditions enabling or limiting capabilities" (Sayer 2012: 580). Gangas remarks in a similar vein that CA "says very little about *role placements and role dispositions*" (2016: 114; italics added) and about the *institutional configurations* required to sustain fulfilment of priority capabilities and functionings. Sen (1999a) writes of a series of essential 'instrumental freedoms' but without, unlike Parsons and many sociologists, much depth on the institutions that might sustainably support them. The great Indian socio-economist C.T. Kurien contrasted his own careful specification of institutional context, as a precondition for realistic economic theorizing, with Sen's more abstracted approach. Sen defends "[a] general approach [that] can be used in many different ways, depending on the context and the information that is available. It is this combination of foundational analysis and pragmatic use that gives the capability [and entitlements] approach its extensive reach" (Sen 1999a: 86; my addition). His case studies of hunger and food policy, for example, contain far more institutional specification than does his broad theorizing. Lastly, many authors (e.g., Deneulin 2006) note that *collective actors* rather than individuals are essential in attempts to change or counteract social structures, including norms and roles. Sayer, Gangas, and Deneulin et al. all suggest though, unlike Dean, that these common gaps or weaknesses in use of CA are remediable and being remedied.

More attention is given in CA to the social influencing of *preferences*, including some attention to unconscious internalization of *social norms*, an easy step to make beyond 'adaptive preference'. Gangas sees in *The Idea of Justice* (2009) some move towards Durkheim's "response to the Hobbesian problem of order. [Recognition of the] force of [collective] affective sentiments …the normative glue of the collective, beyond the functional and utilitarian justifications for human interdependence" (2020: 198). The distance between CA and sociology has perhaps been greater in respect to formation of *social capabilities*, embodied in or promoted by institutions and traditions. Some of these overlap with what van Staveren (2001) calls 'moral capabilities' of

persons: to be able to interact with others, to form purposes and commit to and act on these, and to balance incommensurable values. Sagovsky (2006) warned that CA has been weak here. Some work has appeared, however, such as by Nussbaum (2001, 2013).

A further possible area of relative current CA weakness concerns insufficient "treatment of the *social construction of meaning*" more broadly, the meaning systems which people absorb and which form them as people (Kremakova 2013: 404; italics added; cf. also Salais 2009). Gangas suggests that Sen sometimes resists such a focus. He fears oversimplification and stereotyping of 'cultures', and emphasises rather that people can and do make their own constructions of value and identity (see, e.g., Sen 2004b). Bonvin and Laruffa (2018) respond too, perhaps slightly off the point, by noting Sen's interest in the social emergence of public purposes. His reasons for democracy include not only its inherent worth and instrumental roles (it mobilizes information and provides pressures to respect the interests of each participant), but its promotion of social learning about one's fellows and of formation of shared purposes (Sen 1999b). People can rise above their limited positional objectivity.[21] Salais (2009) argues that a social choice theory approach to public reasoning has lacked but needs a notion of *common good*. This could help to extend Sen's notion of 'commitment', to clearly cover also Smith's 'public spirit' and to apply in all groups within which one is interconnected.

So, more relevant than claiming that all requirements are already fulfilled within Sen's indeed voluminous corpus, is the response by authors like Caroline Hart (2013, 2019). For her work on aspirations and education Hart combined CA with Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, fields of interaction and multiple forms of capital (social, cultural, symbolic, as well as economic) that affect the attainment of capabilities and functionings. Sen provided her with tools to consider a wide range of human capacities and outcomes; Bourdieu provided tools to investigate the social contexts and processes in accessing and progressing in higher education. Ideas of habitus allowed discussion of social formation of the person, including of subconscious assumptions, in her studies on emergence and application of expectations and aspirations and hence of capabilities. Sen is himself clear that he does not offer a total theory and that his ideas can be combined with and enriched by other perspectives.

4.3   A programmatic conception of the person

Writing before Sen's 2005 and 2006 books, Davis thought: "Sen does not actually have a *theory* of the individual" (2003: 164; emphasis in the original), neither a theory of the social formation of individuals nor a theory of how individuals can be/become independent choosers despite being to a major extent socially embedded. Mary Douglas claimed that Sen adopted a picture

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[21] Bonvin & Laruffa (2018) argue that the ideas of description-as-choice and positional-objectivity readily lead on to an awareness of social construction of *understandings* through democracy; but the issue of social construction of *meanings* is more basic.

"that wants emanate from individuals and that basically individuals are the same the world over" (Douglas et al. 1998: 228). Maniar asserts somewhat similarly that the "Capabilities Approach assumes that subjectivities are already formed and need to be responded to" (2019: 9).[22]

Even so, commentators had noted that "we find much relevant qualification and elaboration already in Sen; and that the capability approach lends itself to enrichment from work with deeper analyses of agency" (Gasper 2000: 998). Sen remarked for example that many women imbibe masculinist ideology and are even the proximate drivers for female feticide (e.g., 2005a: 239-40). They thus need more than only schooling and access to employment. Using terms from Len Doyal and Ian Gough, we can say that besides *autonomy of agency,* ability to act independently, people need ability to think independently (Sen 2005a: 239) – *critical autonomy* (Gough 2014). Sen's own definition of agency as "the pursuit of goals and objectives that a person has reason to value and advance" (2005a: 221) does not exclude critical autonomy but is less clear.

Since Davis's comment above in 2003, Sen has continued his elaborations, making explicit what he had in mind;[23] and other authors have suggested extensions. We saw that Gangas considers that a compatible framing for Sen's ideas is Parsons' theory of "the action system and its normative ideal of 'institutionalized individualism'" (2016: 30).[24] Sen's elaborations, while considerable, do not remove the need for such extensions. He has, for example, written further on his admiration for Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, showing that he aims for a social not asocial psychology. As Holmwood (2013) remarks, however, there is more to be said in social psychology now than Adam Smith could. Smith looked especially at the individual, thinking about others and mutual relations, rather less than at the whole social moulding and constraining of the person. We need, continues Holmwood, "the idea of a social self that overcomes the dualism of instrumental and value-rational action…that otherwise dominate[s]… contemporary economics and sociology" (2013: 1182). He acknowledges that Sen addresses both sides of this Weberian duality, between behaviour that aims to do whatever maximizes achievement of given objectives and behaviour that instead follows given fixed valued forms; in fact, Sen (2009) is explicit on the limitations of that dualism.

Davis's own proposed enrichment is "that having a personal identity is having a capability, … being able to not be lost in different social relationships is a matter of having capability to move across them and maintain one's sense of self. What is needed is not only that one remains a distinct individual (my individuation criterion) but remains one across changing circumstances (my reidentification criterion)" (personal communication, 2 September 2020). Indeed: "the entire capabilities-as-freedoms framework depends on the one

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[22] For other discussions of the limited conception of personhood in Sen's writings through 1999, see e.g. Gasper (2002), Gasper & van Staveren (2003).
[23] See e.g. remarks already in his 1988 interview with Richard Swedberg (Sen 1990: 260), on personal identity as a plurality of memberships.
[24] Citing Parsons & Smelser (1956: 49).

central freedom or capability of being able to sustain a personal identity" (Davis 2007: 331). More fully:

> If individuals…are enmeshed in countless cross-cutting social group relationships, one way we may understand individual freedom is in terms of their being able to move back and forth comfortably across these relationships… [in other words, to not be] fragmented and lost amid these relationships, but…sustain an individual identity across them. Sen's idea [is] that individuals develop their capabilities by exercising a freedom to explore possibilities in life… Agency freedom…can accordingly be thought central to understanding the personal identity of socially embedded individuals. [The ability to investigate, span and balance/reconcile their multiple relationships] would identify them as independent individuals. (Davis 2003: 179; my expansion)

Sen's more recent work emphasises a similar view.[25] Thus a few years later Davis could write: "Sen claims that individuals are able to make first-person reflexive representations of themselves to counter others' third-person representations of them" (2010: 174). The model of personhood in Sen's 2005 and 2006 books is ambitious. In it, people are reflexive and thoughtful about everything, including about which group affiliations and identities they might accept and combine. He says people can or should be able to say who they are, choosing-cum-composing their own identity out of their multitude of characteristics, affiliations, ideals and loyalties. Their distinctiveness as persons arises precisely out of this reflective mix-and-match-ing. Is this conception of personal identity presented as descriptive as well as normative/programmatic? In the essay "The Smallness Thrust Upon Us" Sen writes that in "determining the relative importance of [our] diverse diversities, and…understanding the priorities between them… [t]hese choices cannot be settled—as some communitarians have claimed—as a matter of passive 'discovery'" (2015: 45). Is the "cannot" here descriptive as well as normative? For many, even most, people in most of history and possibly continuing nowadays, the independent sense of self may not be or have been strong enough for Sen's vision to serve as a general description. Certain given identities are declared as unavoidable and overriding. Nationalist affirmations, for example, are not in decline; and the notion that markets transform or divert these or other sectarian passions into mere interests or options that people calmly reason about does not appear confirmed by experience.

Sen persuasively advocates a 'large India' conception, that does not neglect Buddha, Ashoka, Kabir, Nanak and Akbar, above a 'small India' notion that could stress only Rama (Sen 2005a: 75). He presents the 'small India' notion as an inferior chosen description, a neglect of relevant information.[26] But he does not enter the minds of those who cling to 'small India'. Similarly, his incisive dissection of conceptual oversimplifications in discussions of secularism is not an existential investigation of the angers, fears, lived experiences and social

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[25] Whereas Davis engages in depth with social theories (notably, about collective intentionality) in order to do so, Sen does not. His work is supplemented by Davis's.
[26] See for example his brilliant exposition of India's diversity of calendar systems (2005a, 2015)

manipulation that may drive Indian anti-secularism.[27] Will self-definition and drawing on multiple cultural strands prosper in many environments? Sen replies that numerous people throughout recorded history, and certainly nowadays, have evidently been busy with their own self-definition, for otherwise there would be no "need for the policing of adherence and loyalty, which is typically so active in communitarian activism" (2015: 50). And the growth of such self-definition is a central feature, both descriptively and normatively, of 'development' (2015: 51). Indeed, his slogan 'development as freedom' can refer as much or more to this theme of self-definition than to questions of economic choice or political democracy.

4.4   On power and capitalism

Sen does sometimes discuss power, rarely power-systems (Hill 2003). He is shrewdly critical of the quasi-religious vacuity in ideas of 'dictatorship of the proletariat' and of similar utopian proposals which do not find 'countervailing powers' necessary (Sen 2019). In his Foreword to Paul Farmer's *Pathologies of Power*, he approvingly quotes Farmer's argument: "Human rights violations are not accidents.... [They] are, rather, symptoms of deeper pathologies of power" (Sen 2005b: xiii). But his remarks suggest a distance from relevant literatures: "Farmer points to what he calls 'structural violence'" (p.xiii), he writes, using quotation marks for the term coined by Johan Galtung in the 1960s; and he continues to do so (e.g., "details in each case help us to understand Farmer's notion of 'structural violence'", p.xv).

Many critics (e.g., Dean 2009, Gasper 2009, Harvey 2014) note Sen's lack of attention to capitalist relations in particular, in contrast to his regular praise of market relations, which are presented as promoting both opportunity freedom and process freedom (Sen 1993, 1999a). Gangas acknowledges that "For all its merits, Sen's system operates within the parameters set by current market mechanisms. While wisely abstaining from any utopian projection, Sen's model abstracts from the systemic structure of global capitalism" (2020: 92). The impacts of capitalist and market relations on people and on politics are treated relatively lightly.[28] The *Idea of Justice* does not make clear how acceptable he finds the conditions under past and present capitalist systems that mould the formation of wants. Gangas implies though that we should try to distinguish between gaps in theorizing that can be filled (like that one), distortions that can be remedied or counteracted, and any biases that are irremediable (see also Gasper 2007a, 2009).

Bonvin and Laruffa (2018: 223) agree that Sen's 1993 ode to "Markets and Freedoms" was overly optimistic about the ability of a democracy to tidy up

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[27] Ghosh goes much further and asserts: "Sen has on many occasions…stopped short of answering why the largest majority of Indian people still remain utterly superstitious or averse to scientific temperament…" (2006: 309).
[28] In contrast, Charles Lindblom, theorist of *The Intelligence of Democracy* (1965) in terms very similar to Sen's, moved on to consider also the profoundly undemocratic corporate and plutocratic capture of politics, in works like *The Market System* (2001).

the social effects of an unconstrained market; instead 'the market' needs to be constitutionally constrained. In stronger language, capitalism will otherwise dominate the public realm. In his later work Sen himself has outlined the folly of a 'I am against poverty, but I am not bothered by inequality' stance; for inequality brings power differentials that distort most other matters (2005b: xvi). The world as a whole, like most countries, including India, has ample capacity to solve problems of basic health, for example, but does not do so (p.xvii).

More usually though, Sen presents a generalized, optimistic notion of what democracy achieves: "public discussion", leading to "a better understanding of the lives of others" (2009: 344). Elaborating this view, Bonvin and Laruffa (2018: 224) claim that compared to markets, which just take preferences as givens (a comment which ignores the immense efforts by capitalist businesses to mould preferences), democracy has a potential for questioning and reforming preferences, for promoting the 'capacity to aspire', and for expression of views and interests not only in proportion to purchasing power. Given Sen's intra-establishment 'gentle persuader' style and his relative lack of a theory of established power, one can ask how far do high-tone emphases on freedom, democracy and reasoning reflect a too comfortable 'top-table' reformism? Or how far do they represent instead, perhaps even more so post-2014, a long-term radical normative programme?

5 Faith in democracy as "government by discussion", in a world of wealth and emotions

Sen's theorizing on democracy arguably reflects the gaps in his social theorizing. It lacks "in-depth discussion of the political and power dynamics of reasoning processes and their unavoidable trade-offs" (Deneulin and McGregor 2009: 513). High optimism on democracy may reflect also a high optimism regarding reasoning self-determining individuals.[29] But the distance between, on one hand, the eloquent rationalism in *The Idea of Justice* (2009) and in the formidable enlarged edition of *Collective Choice and Social Welfare* (2017a) and, on the other hand, the screaming and opportunistic worlds of India's (and many countries') contemporary democratic politics and its mainstream media and 'social' media appears very great.[30] We might perhaps view the theorizing as a normative vision more than as an understanding of contemporary societies. For such understanding, the ideas do though contain valuable potentials and newer work is developing these. For an inspirational role, to reach audiences outside the seminar room would require further ingredients too (Gasper 2009, 2018).

5.1 Ideal theory of democracy

Sen itemizes a series of benefits of democracy, including the airing of information and provision of pressure to respect the interests of each citizen; "…democracy is not only a blessing in itself, but can also be the most important means to pursue public ends" (Sen 2005a: 194).[31] He often uses this same language for discussing a free press or 'political voice' or electoral democracy or 'public reason'/'public reasoning' in general. He appears optimistic about the degree of convergence that public reasoning will bring. The historical record makes some of the claims appear exaggerated, as we noted for example concerning how far (actual) democracy counteracts market-generated inequalities or regulates centrally imposed declarations of what is culturally appropriate.

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[29] "…I do not believe that, in general, dissociation of choice from reasoning is a sweeping characteristic of the world in which we live" (Sen 2007b: 343). This standpoint seems distant from much in modern psychology, neuroscience and behavioural research.

[30] The Roman politician Cicero wrote of his contemporary Cato's approach to politics: "he speaks and votes as if he were in the Republic of Plato, not in Romulus's shit pit", i.e. in the reality of Rome's politics (as translated in Colin Wilson & Damon Wilson, 2015, *An End to Murder*, London: Robinson). Sen does not imagine that we live in an ideal sphere of 'government by discussion' but leaves us wondering about how to connect ideals and realities and about what important features of reality have been left out from the picture of the ideal.

[31] And: "It is hard to escape the general conclusion that economic performance, social opportunity and political voice are deeply interrelated." (Sen 2005a: 201).

However, Sen refers for at least much of the time not to mere ballot-box democracy but to deliberative democracy, an ideal of "government by discussion": orderly reasoned open dialogue. This phrase from Victorian Britain comes from Walter Bagehot and the concept derives from John Stuart Mill. Both were later revived by James Buchanan (see, e.g., Sen 2017a: Chs. A1, A4). When accepting the Hirschman Prize in 2017, Sen criticized the Brexit decision-making procedure, for example, in which a vote by a minority of the total electorate after an unmoderated campaign was given more than consultative status, and effectively replaced a calm and carefully considered decision-process through the legally authorized representative Parliament after full and moderated discussion (Sen 2017b).

So, "for him, democracy is not a matter of registering individual preferences as they are at a specific point in time, but a mechanism to allow the effective integration of all relevant positional objectivities in collective decision-making processes. In the course of such processes, individual preferences may be transformed and revised", note Bonvin and Laruffa (2018: 225). They acknowledge, however, that the prerequisites for this deliberative ideal – equal voice, willingness to listen openly and reflect, etc. – are nearly always absent. James Fishkin's 'deliberative polling' exercises are instructive exceptions (e.g., Fishkin 2009; they are not mentioned in Sen 2017a). Sen's belief in dialogical reasoned persuasion matches his oft-repeated call for case-by-case 'critical scrutiny' not general slogans— which is perhaps rather remote from most practice in actually-existing democracies. Government by informed, civil discussion seems to imply much more and often much different from majority rule in our actual contexts of capital, nation, faction and class. Just as Sen has sought to reclaim the 'freedom' label, so he wishes to retain the kudos of 'democracy' for his rationalist ideal. But his real focus is "the role of reasoning in social choice" (2017a: 453), and actually-existing democracies are often far distant from, and even antipathetic to, 'government by discussion', perhaps increasingly so in an era of echo-chamber social media. So, should the same term, 'democracy', be used for both his ideal and the actuality?

Sen brings a remarkably sharp eye to examining notions like "recognition" (2005a: 35) or 'modernity'. He demolishes "the belief that being 'modern' is a well-defined concept" (2005a: 133) or has a consistent normative significance. He might not be equally strict for 'democracy'. His fondness for the 'government by discussion' notion seems to conduce to sometimes using the term 'democracy' as almost automatically good, both inherently and instrumentally. His response to disappointment with its fruits is then typically to call for "a more vigorous practice of democracy" (2005a: 36).

We should consistently distinguish at least Democracy-A (actually existing), including Democracy-B (ballot-box, in many electoral variants), from Democracy-D (deliberative; "Democracy as Public Reason", Sen 2009; the title of Ch.15) and Democracy-I, which operationalizes Democracy-D plus other dimensions of a normative ideal, including requisites for open respectful discussion including fulfilment of basic human rights, as in the complex and widely applied methodology of IDEA, the International Institute of Democracy and Electoral Assistance (www.idea.int; Beetham 1994). Sen

proposes that "the view that democracy is best seen as 'government by discussion' has gained widespread support" (2009: 324) – meaning though that this is his (and many others') recommended form of democracy, not that such a definition is scientifically superior for understanding actual practice.

5.2   Actual democracy and actual practice

Democratic systems may contain many predominantly self-interested citizens. Even if these have equal powers, their free political participation brings biases towards those who are in a position to reap great benefit through a particular arrangement, for they have sufficient incentive to mobilize and invest to establish and defend it, even when it brings a much larger aggregate loss but one that is spread thinly over numerous other people (e.g., Sen 2017a: 400). This long-known danger applies in all political systems, but democracy gives it considerable scope and momentum, as well as potentially offering wider channels for resistance. For both reasons, democracy theorists call for highly socially responsible citizens. 'Commitment', including public spirit, is not an optional extra but instead a necessary foundation of well-functioning democracies, and indeed of healthy personalities.

> [T]he health and stability of a modern democracy depends, not only on the justice of its basic institutions, but also on the qualities and attitudes of its citizens: e.g. their sense of identity and how they view potentially competing forms of national, regional, ethnic, or religious identities; their ability to tolerate and work together with others who are different from themselves; their desire to participate in the political process in order to promote the public good and hold political authorities accountable; their willingness to show self-restraint and exercise personal responsibility in their economic demands, and in personal choices which affect their health and the environment. Without citizens who possess these qualities, democracies become difficult to govern, even unstable. (Kymlicka 2002: 285).

Ghosh's review of *The Argumentative Indian* concludes, in contrast, that Sen provides: "[no] answers to the questions: Why contemporary [Indians] are so deceitful in the land of the Buddha, so immodest in the land of Ashoka, Kabir, Guru Nanak, Sri Chaitanya and Ramakrishna, so unlawful in the land of Chanakya, so greedy in the land of Harsha, so intolerant in the land of Akbar, so ignorant in the land of Tagore and Amartya, so violent in the land of Gandhi, so indisciplined in the land of Vivekananda, Netaji and Patel and so retrogressive in the land of Nehru" (Ghosh 2006: 315). Conceivably those historic figures emerged precisely in reaction to longstanding prevalence of the problems mentioned.

Second, citizens have very far from equal powers, and democratic systems do not exist in isolation. Sen speaks for a public deliberative space equally accessible to all, but this has never existed, not least under capitalism, and the space and access have been further reduced under neoliberalism, argue Dean (2009) and Nancy Fraser (1997).

Third, partly reflecting the sharply unequal contexts around democratic systems,

[any] 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. (Dean 2009: 270).

So: "in the aftermath of several generations of neoliberal public policy, the 'standards of the community' have been consistent with elected governments that have favoured welfare cutbacks over welfare spending and labour market deregulation over regulation" (Holmwood 2013: 1181). Similarly, throughout three generations of democratic India the balance of public policy has never been pro-poor. The state of "government by discussion" in contemporary India, and also in the USA, the second largest democracy, or the UK with its "Mother of Parliaments", is disturbing in many respects. Democracy-A is frequently remote from "Democracy as Public Reason".

5.3   Democracy in India – Sen's unwilling hero

Sen is keenly aware that Indian democracy (and Indian media) has over seventy years shown relatively little interest in hunger or mass education or mass morbidity (e.g., 2017a: 403 ff.). As he recognises, India's extreme inequality, including in education and health, seems to undermine its democratic forms (Gasper 2018). His 'no famines in a democracy' hypothesis does not appear transferable beyond famines.[32] The key required mechanism is not merely balloting but democracy's "ability to make people take an interest, through public discussion, in each other's predicaments, and to have a better understanding of the lives of others" (Sen 2009: 344). But as he knows, 'ability' means here only a potential. "Sen is not unaware that in a poverty stricken and illiterate democracy, the 'intermediate regimes' are more alert and effective…to extract 'rent'" (Ghosh 2006: 313). He has explored the paradox of an India with vast food surpluses and yet vast malnutrition, and notes "how little public attention it gets, when it gets any at all" (Sen 2005a: 212-3). Instead old myths prevail, that 'we' have plenty of food available, 'so' the idle poor must be failing to work. He sees how rich farmers have dominated the democratic polity to obtain high food prices (2005a: 214-5; 2015) and holds then that we need more

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[32] For famines too, the thesis must be refined from 'no famine in a democracy' to at least 'no famine in "a functioning democracy with regular elections, opposition parties, basic freedom of speech and relatively free media"' (Sen 2009: 342). Even this description might still fit some famine cases. For the 1943 Bengal famine, Sen remarks: "There was of course no parliament in India under the British colonial administration" (2009: 339), by which he means no national parliament. He mentions though "the local Bengal government" (p.340) but does not discuss its role, nor that of the elected Bengal Assembly. The provincial government was led in 1943 by first the Krishak Praja Party and the Hindu Mahasabha under Shyam Prasad Mukherjee, and then from April 1943 to March 1945 by the Muslim League, with Sir Khawaja Nazimuddin as Prime Minister of Bengal. But while we should beware reduction of the position about no famine "in a functioning democracy" (p.343) to a tautology, the theme remains important even if the thesis correctly concerns 'less' not 'no' famine.

democracy. By that he no doubt intends much more involvement of well-informed, well-mobilized poorer groups, capable of acting and unafraid to act. But what issues mobilize the poor in reality? His other proposed remedy for failings of democracy is more education, but India's democratic political system has produced far too little education for the poor.

Sen's constant call for public reasoning leaves him wary of over-generalized rules. The ideal reasoner proposes 'let's reason' for each specific case, more than 'let's institution-build' in the form of pre-set fixed guarantees. Yet countering institutionalized injustices requires institutionalized forms for justice. Invariable insistence on situational reasoning could reflect a sociological naivete. To leave the operationalization of justice to be discussed afresh in each situation, without constitutionally fixed prioritizations, leaves too much power to the powerful (Nussbaum 2003; Gasper 2007a). The best can become enemy of the good. Sen has called Ambedkar "father of my economics", yet his writings on justice may give more prominence to Smith and Mill than to Ambedkar or the Indian Constitution.

Ambedkar knew that the Constitution would be hobbled if not accompanied by a battle against caste, disgust-based social hierarchy. While Sen illuminates human complexity in many respects, he may understate it in some others and thus under-specify human personhood and potentials. He lacks theories of the *demos*, of the crowd, and of populism (cf. Canetti 1962). His essay on the national trait of preoccupation with 'first in class' ("The Country of First Boys", in his book of the same name, 2015) does not situate it within a perspective on social hierarchy and caste. In his and Drèze's conspectus of contemporary India, *An Uncertain Glory,* "the agents are not strongly highlighted. We read a thoughtful diagnosis of mistakes, oversights, blind spots; but less about the agents who commit them, and their passions and perceptions, likes and dislikes" (Gasper 2018: 284). The book admits that "we know very little about which institutions matter" for development (Drèze and Sen 2013: 36), but this applies also to Western forms of political democracy: Democracy-A and -B, and possibly Democracy-D too. Drèze and Sen acknowledge the insufficiency of India's Democracy-A: the "strongly incriminating evidence against taking Indian democracy to be adequately successful in consequential terms" (2013: 244). Nor has Democracy-D reached far, including in the Congress decades; "public discussion[s] in India, as [he and Drèze] show, are completely dominated by affluent groups and their concerns. Indian [mass-]media provide[d] little or no coverage of the lives of half the country (except in constant attacks on pro-poor programmes)" (Gasper 2018: 284), while "the relatively privileged seem to have created a social [and mental] universe of their own" (Drèze and Sen 2013: 268).

Drèze and Sen present injustice, corruption and lack of dignity as problems to be calmly analysed and counteracted. Persuasive power in actually existing democracies seems, however, often to come less through 'critical scrutiny' and appeals to a general ideal of freedom than through a "set of mobilizing 'myths' about an imaginable desirable attainable future, anger-inducing enemies … and inspirational 'heroes' to be loyal to…" (Gasper 2018: 285).

5.4   Mobilizing capability theory to better understand democracy

Sen's ideas do inspire many researchers. The capability approach is an ongoing stream of inquiry and gradually more realistic attention is being given to democracy. Bonvin and Laruffa (2018: 227) argue that: "in contrast to the idealistic approach to deliberative democracy, the CA has great potential for developing a more realistic analysis of democratic processes – one that takes into account the teachings of sociological studies (Bonvin et al., 2018) … [First] The purpose is not to reach a view from nowhere where citizens are called to put aside their positions and interests, but to let situated views communicate and debate. … Sen's theory does not follow the 'abstraction strategy' of deliberative democrats…".

Second, the CA apparatus for discussing conversion factors can help in understanding the limits of formal democracy in converting formal rights into equal participation. It "allows a sociologically grounded understanding of how individual agency and social structures interact in the formation of preferences" (Bonvin and Laruffa 2018: 228). The "allows" here reflects the need to build on but extend Sen's thinking, although the 'adaptive preference' idea gives a start for considering limitations on people's aspirations and their capacity to speak. Bonvin and Laruffa connect the requirements for effective democracy to Appadurai's idea of capacity to aspire (rendered as "ability to form one's preferences"; 2018: 222) and to "capability for voice", the ability to speak and be heard. The approach brings a focus on incremental improvements from where one starts, not with defining a perfect ideal.

> …this specific understanding of democracy departs [i.e. diverges] both from market mechanisms and from ideal conceptions of deliberative democracy. …it develops rigorous empirical tools for the sociological investigation of democratic processes and how these are impacted by material, symbolic and deliberative inequalities. In our view, the CA's main contribution [here] is to shed light on … how preferences are formed (in connection with the notion of capacity to aspire) and how they are then called to confront and coordinate themselves when collective decision-making takes place (this calls for examining the differential degree of capability for voice enjoyed by the various stakeholders). As such, the CA opens up a new field of research for a more appropriate sociological understanding of democratic processes. (Bonvin and Laruffa 2018: 230).[33]

Much more must be added, regarding the formation of selves, crowd psychology and the power systems which can drive identity formation in ways far different from the reflective, sophisticated, open-minded ideal articulated by Sen. "…the reasoned deliberation that Sen is looking for requires much more than reason" (Giri 2002: 239). Sen's work makes contributions though not only as a normative vision but also towards rendering such a vision more practical and realistic, using capability approach concepts including, as we saw earlier, its "series of items suited for empirical inquiry – opportunities,

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[33] Venkataraman expresses similar hopes in regard "to understand[ing] the subtleties of exclusion in education" in India (2016: 3).

resources, entitlements, conversion factors, achievements" (Zimmermann 2018: 284), amongst others. These might help to structure a workable research programme, usefully refined but not too abstruse, hence perhaps able to—'democratically'—mobilize interest and efforts by contributors drawn from across the social sciences.

6   Conclusion – valuable for sociology and in need of sociology

Sen should be of interest for sociologists and others outside economics, not as an explicit 'social theorist' but as a penetrating social analyst and thoughtful philosopher of freedom and democracy. While his work is an outlier in terms of social theory, and has various limitations, it has major strengths too and a global following, perhaps greater than that of any Indian sociologist. It opens new areas and provides important tools if not a conventional grand social theory. Hunger and famine. for example, have not been central topics in sociology, yet should be. Sen's work is both an attempt to understand contemporary realities, and a programmatic vision of human freedom and its growth and promotion. From this perspective, "the ultimate concern has to be the lives we can or cannot lead. ...ultimately economics and sociology look at different aspects of the same phenomenon, viz. the lives of human beings in society" (Sen 1990a: 266).

Like other choice-and-freedom centred social analysts he raises also a challenge to some sociology, the intellectual field created to be a broad science of society distinct from or subsuming economics. Sen has sought to reform economics not to exit from it and, we saw, has sought to recapture the potent term freedom from apostles of unrestrained markets. We saw that his main teachers in social theorizing have perhaps been from pre- and early-modern eras, before the full separation-out of autonomous market systems and before the separation of economics and sociology. In some ways, debates in 17th through 19th century Britain and France were indeed useful sources for thinking about 20th century India. Davis (2003: 166) argues though that the picture of the timeless reasoning individual found in Descartes and Locke antedates industrialization and the corresponding transformations of society and increased perception of persons and society as transformable in time. Davis presents (2003: 182-3) the challenge for the modern social sciences as having been, and continuing to be, to understand the socially embedded individual not the disembedded Descartes-Locke reasoner; a challenge that he considers Adam Smith began to address. Sen proceeds from the intellectual legacies of Smith, Mill, Dewey and Tagore, but adds various tools, while leaving as we have seen much scope for combining with the insights of others. *The Idea of Justice* concludes with the reflection that: "The pursuit of a theory of justice has something to do with…: what is it like to be be a human being?" (Sen 2009: 414). We saw that Sen transcends *homo economicus* or the mutilated loners assumed in "the so-called Rational Choice Theory" (2007b: 342); he invokes human proclivities to sympathy and social commitment, abilities "to reason, argue, disagree and concur" (2009: 415), and desires for freedom, affiliation and identity. However, given his relative neglect of modern psychology, sociology and anthropology, we need to add in many areas.

We saw that Gangas' recent book (2020) on *Sociological Theory and the Capability Approach* takes up part of this challenge.[34] It warns of "underestimation of social structures and institutions by CA" (p.219), with specific reference to Sen, and the consequent "risks of getting trapped into … an overestimation of its normative potential" (p.259). The book seeks to repair this. It connects CA to high social theory, including Weber and especially Durkheim and their synthesiser Parsons, as well as to the philosophies of Kant and Hegel that nourished their thinking, and to many recent sociological theorists. Gangas argues that Parsons provides some of the social theory underpinning that Sen requires. First, Parsons reflected in depth on the capacities required for the social actor to participate as a full citizen, and second, his conception of 'institutionalized individualism' "offers a template for a theory of social institutions and role-complexes, upon which the capable actor's goal orientations are normatively grounded and evaluatively sanctioned" (Gangas 2020: 124). However, Parsons' concept of capacities was not as helpfully concrete and operational as Sen's notion of capability (p.131). So, using the CA can lead one to ask about social structures and how they affect what people can do. As yet, "CA has only partially articulated the institutional presuppositions of the 'good' and 'just' society [and the] institutional pathways to the [central human capabilities]" (Gangas 2020: 29).[35] Sociological theories can enrich "visualizing how the capable self's choices and freedoms are supported [and constrained] by social institutions" (p.10; my addition).

Sen's work offers sociology "a resourceful conception of agency aligned to a vision of a good society" (Gangas 2020: 111). Parsons, Etzioni, Giddens and others were close to such a conception of agency, while Durkheim made clear the importance of such visions in cohesive societies and also in social sciences.[36] For we study society in large part because we consider human life valuable, improvable, and to try to improve it; we must then pay attention to what improvement means. The capability approach—or, more fully specified, a 'human development approach' (Nussbaum 2011; Gasper 2005b)—offers, Gangas suggests, one normative framework for a normatively deepened sociology. Such a manifesto leads beyond Sen's own work and gives an agenda for research to test how far it can be taken.

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[34] Some chapters of Gangas's deeply thoughtful study are readily accessible, as are his journal papers. Some parts (e.g. Ch.1) unfortunately illustrate, in contrast to Sen's work, difficulties in communication across disciplines, and might be found overabstract, overloaded, and hard to penetrate by some readers from other fields.
[35] Not the least of these institutional requisites is "a meta-level of coordination of citizens' commitment to a liberal culture that does not collapse under the freedoms it secures and provides for its citizens" (Gangas 2020: 182).
[36] Gasper (2005a) presents an integration of the formats of capability theory, human rights, and needs theory (cf. Gough 2014) that clarifies this normativity.

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