Journal of Economy Culture and Society

ISSN: 2602-2656 / E-ISSN: 2645-8772

Year 2018, Issue 58

Themed Issue on Social Capital
Sosyal Sermaye Temalı Sayı

Issue Editor/Sayı Editörü
Prof. Dr. Nadir Suğur

The journal was previously entitled as Istanbul Journal of Sociological Studies
Derginin önceki ismi: Sosyoloji Konferansları

Journal of Economy Culture and Society is covered in;
Web of Science Core Collection, Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI)
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Journal of Economy Culture and Society

ISSN: 2602-2656 / E-ISSN: 2645-8772

Year 2018, Issue 58

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Publishing Company / Yayıncı Kuruluş

Istanbul University Press / İstanbul Üniversitesi Yayınevi
İstanbul Üniversitesi Merkez Kampüsü,
34452 Beyazıt, Fatih / İstanbul - Türkiye
Phone / Telefon: +90 (212) 440 00 00

Prepared by / Yayına Hazırlayan

Yerküre Tanıtım ve Yayıncılık Hizmetleri A.Ş.
Cumhuriyet Caddesi 48/3B Harbiye 34367 İstanbul - Türkiye
Phone / Telefon: +90 (212) 240 28 20
Fax / Faks: +90 (212) 241 68 20
www.yerkure.com.tr

Printed in / Baskı

Hamdioğulları İç ve Dış Ticaret A.Ş.
Zübeyde Hanım Mh., Elif Sk., No.7/197 Altındağ / Ankara - Türkiye
Phone / Telefon: +90 (312) 342 08 00
Fax / Faks: +90 (312) 342 08 01
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Journal of Economy Culture and Society

ISSN: 2602-2656 / E-ISSN: 2645-8772

Year 2018, Issue 58

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Haziran ve Aralık aylarında, yılda iki sayı olarak yayınlanan hakemli, açık erişimli ve uluslararası bilimsel bir dergidir.

Journal of Economy Culture and Society

ISSN: 2602-2656 / E-ISSN: 2645-8772

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Theoretical Article / Kuramsal Makale

Beyond the Conventional -A Sociological Criticism of Sen's Capability Approach-

Gelenekselin Ötesi -Sen'in Yapabilirlik Yaklaşımının Sosyolojik Bir Eleştirisi-

M. Onur ARUN[1]

This is a slightly revised piece of a part of my Ph.D. Thesis that I completed in 2016 in the University of Manchester/UK. I am grateful to James Nazroo, Wendy Bottero, Nicholas Thoburn, and Mesut Yeğen for their critical scrutiny and enlightening comments that helped me in refining the arguments presented in this piece. I also wish to thank any anonymous referees who spared their time to assess this work in the process of publication.

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Received: 20.03.2018
Accepted: 03.08.2018

Citation: Arun, M. O. (2018). Beyond the conventional -A sociological criticism of Sen's capability approach-. *Journal of Economy Culture and Society,* 58, 229-245. https://doi.org/10.26650/JECS407989

ABSTRACT

The capability approach initially developed by Amartya Sen is a new evaluative framework frequently used by scholars and policy makers who aim to deal with issues related to development, welfare, poverty, social choice theory, inequality and justice. Drawing upon a sociological account of various diversities related to individuals' characteristics and their social/institutional surroundings, the approach criticizes some mainstream political theories of social justice such as the utilitarian, libertarian and Rawlsian models of social justice. Therefore, it is usually addressed as a "sociological turn" within the relevant literature. This work argues that this is not a fully-deserved characteristic since the approach employs a sociologically-informed perspective of various diversities primarily to criticize rival theories of justice, but not to configure the analytical texture of its own authentic proposal that advocates "individuals' ability to achieve what they have reason to value" as the focal point of assessment of social justice.

Keywords: The capability approach, social justice, sociology

ÖZ

İlk olarak Amartya Sen tarafından geliştirilen yapabilirlik yaklaşımı kalkınma, refah, yoksulluk, sosyal seçim kuramı, eşitsizlik ve adalet ile ilgilenmeyi amaç edinmiş bilim insanları ve siyasa yapıcılar tarafından sıklıkla başvurulan yeni bir değerlendirme çerçevesidir. Söz konusu yaklaşım, bireylere ve onları çevreleyen çok çeşitli sosyal/kurumsal farklılıklara ilişkin sosyolojik bir bakış açısını kullanarak, faydacı, liberteryen ve Rawlsçu sosyal adalet teorileri gibi kimi ana akım siyasal adalet yaklaşımlarını eleştirmektedir. Bu sebeple, ilgili literatürde sıklıkla "sosyolojik yönelim" olarak işaret edilmektedir. Bu çalışma, yapabilirlik yaklaşımının sosyal ve kurumsal çeşitliliklere işaret eden sosyolojik perspektifi daha çok rekabet halinde olduğu adalet teorilerini eleştirmek

için kullandığını, fakat "bireylerin bir nedene dayalı olarak değer verdiklerini gerçekleştirebilmeleri" olarak ortaya koyduğu kendi özgün önerisinin analitik dokusunu oluşturmak için aynı sosyolojik bakış açısını kullanmadığını tartışarak, kendisine atfedilen bu özelliği tam anlamıyla hak etmediğini iddia etmektedir.
Anahtar Kelimeler: Yapabilirlik yaklaşımı, sosyal adalet, sosyoloji

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Justice is not only one of the most divine ideals of mankind. It is also one of the most controversial issues of our social history. This can easily be observed with a brief look at existing discussions in literature on social justice which is nowadays dominated by a number of contested political ideas and their persuasive philosophical justifications. Among these ideas, Amartya Sen's capability approach (which advocates the assessment of justice in relation to people's capability or freedom to achieve what they have reason to value) is a new evaluative framework that is also frequently used by scholars and policy makers who work in the fields of development, welfare, poverty and social choice. Sen's capability approach creates a space for itself in the relevant literature by critically approaching, primarily, three mainstream theories of justice, namely utilitarian, libertarian and Rawlsian models of social justice. Although it provides various criticisms on these theories of justice, most of these criticisms arise from a sociologically-informed perspective of diversity embedded in people's various characteristics (e.g. gender, age, social status) and their social/institutional surroundings (e.g. existence of unconstrained flow of information, rule of law, dominant conventions and customs, distributional rules within the family). For example, claiming that the Rawlsian approach to social justice overlooks people's diverse abilities of converting their holdings into something that they value, or the utilitarian account of justice ignores the influence of diverse social conditions on people's mental states. The capability approach boldly underlines influence and significance of social structure. Therefore, the approach is usually addressed as a "sociological turn" within the relevant literature of social justice. However, beyond some conventional criticisms to the capability approach in literature, I argue that the approach employs such a sociologically-informed perspective of diversity, primarily to criticize rival theories of justice, rather than to configure the analytical texture of its own authentic proposal. For example, it draws heavily on a sociological account of the social actor while criticizing certain mainstream theories of justice, but turns to an economic account of the rational actor whose reasoning is reliable in specifying what s/he should be able to be and do. Based on such a critical examination of the primary proposal of the capability approach, I discuss that although the capability approach is addressed as a sociological turn in the relevant literature, this is not a fully-deserved characteristic and its analytical texture still needs to be developed further in relation to a sociologically-informed perspective of both actor and structure.

1. Introduction

Debates on social justice represent a battleground where the titans of the political philosophy have been clashing with persuasive ideas for a long time. Amartya Sen has recently entered this battle with an unusual armament in the field. That is, sociology.

Both classical and contemporary literature on social justice are, in essence, an endeavor that seeks to find an answer to two simple questions: Who gets what? and who gets how much? In this regard, the literature on social justice is a literature on distribution of resources. Within this literature, there are various complementary approaches that identify a particular criterion (e.g. individual's rights) to assess justice in society and comprehensive theories that not only identify a particular criterion, but also provide some principles (e.g. Rawlsian principles of justice as fairness) guiding the application of such criterion. In this literature, a recently emerged paradigm, the capability approach, has attracted significant attention from those who work specifically on issues relating to development, social choice theory, poverty, well-being, inequality and justice.

Drawing upon a distinctive conceptual framework, the capability approach advocates the assessment of social justice in relation to individuals' ability to achieve what they have reason to value in their life. To create a place for itself in the relevant literature, the approach primarily criticizes three mainstream theories of justice, namely utilitarian, libertarian and Rawlsian accounts of justice. In doing so, the approach draws heavily on a sociological account that boldly underlines social and institutional diversities surrounding individuals' lives. Therefore, the approach is considered to be a "sociological turn" within the relevant literature where most theories are built upon an assumption that significantly ignores diversities of individuals and their social/institutional surroundings. However, in this work, my main argument is that the capability approach employs a sociological account of diversity primarily to criticize rival theories, but not in configuring the analytical texture of its own authentic and alternative proposal. In this regard, I argue that both the conceptual and analytical frameworks of the capability approach are still open to a sociological criticism. To underpin this argument, I will first provide normative frameworks of three mainstream theories of social justice, namely the utilitarian, libertarian and Rawlsian models, which are the main theoretical frameworks that the capability approach criticizes whilst developing its own authentic proposal. Following this, I will provide the fundamental pillars and core perspective of the capability approach by paying attention to identifying its distinctive conceptual frameworks. Lastly, I will look to underpin the idea that the capability approach still suffers from the absence of a sociologically informed perspective especially in configuring its own analytical proposal. To achieve this, I will firstly point out that it ignores the fact that individual's reasoning in valuation is shaped by social relations. Based on this, I will claim that not only individuals' values, but their reasoning too is an unreliable source of information in assessing justice. Secondly, I will turn to the conceptualization of a particular term, the conversion factors, that the capability approach frequently points out, to refer the significance of various diversities of individuals in assessing justice. Stressing various ambiguities in the conceptualization of the conversion factors, I will underline that such ambiguities do not occur just because of a simple problem of taxonomy, but the absence of a sociologically-informed configuration of the concept.

2. Theories with the Perfectionist Assumptions for an Imperfect World

Quite a number of different perspectives in the literature of social justice varies from each other in their propositions concerning the primary space of evaluation in allocating resources.

More specifically, perspectives that take different normative positions in the literature of social justice, in essence, identify their primary distinction by proposing unique spaces that should govern the process of evaluation in deciding who gets what and how much. These unique spaces for evaluation are the primary criterion of resource allocation and briefly stated as, for example, "right", "merit", "desert", "utility", "labor", "human needs", "primary goods", "capability", or "freedom". To illustrate, expressing its primary space of evaluation in a form of brief principle, one approach advocates the principle of "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs" (Marx, 1875/1999, p. 166) with the purpose of specifying "human needs" as the primary space of evaluation in deciding how to allocate resources. Obviously, there is tremendous amount of literature behind each space of evaluation proposed by various models of social justice. In this section, however, I will limit my discussion only to three of them, namely utilitarian, libertarian, and Rawlsian models of social justice since they are the rival theories of justice against which the capability approach takes a critical position while constructing its own proposal.

Origins of the modern utilitarian approach to justice can be traced back to the early enlightenment scholars who usually discussed the idea of justice within the moral political philosophy. The Scottish philosopher Hume, for example, advocated that "public utility is the sole origin of justice" (Hume, 1751/1998, p. 13) in his *An Enquiry Concerning the Principle of Morals*. Hume's emphasis on the "public utility" helped to form the classical utilitarian approach in which the "utility" was taken as the space of evaluation for the resource allocation and transformed into a form of state of being that was "happiness". To illustrate this, Bentham argues that "approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question: or, what is the same thing in other words, to promote or to oppose that happiness" (Bentham, 1789/2005, pp. 11–12). In this regard, a public choice, policy decision, or legal action is evaluated with respect to the happiness of the public. Thus, a majoritarian clause of "the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people" (Campbell, 2010, p. 116) becomes the sole criterion of assessing whether a decision, as well as an action, is just or not. So, the utilitarian approach places the state of being of happiness at the center of assessment of the just action and claims that "rules of justice have to lie in the way that they promote the greatest possible quantity of happiness" (Ryan, 1993, p. 12). In this regard, utilitarianism considers justice in accordance with the aggregative interest of the society and, hence, it is considered as aggregative theory of justice (Miller, 1976, p. 32). Although there are some variations, the modern form of the utilitarian logic does not, in essence, differ much from its classical core. This can easily be evidenced in the vast quantities of research where happiness, a subjective state of being, is taken as the focal point in various policy propositions. Briefly, three distinctive characteristics are pointed out to define the utilitarian approach: Welfarism, which takes subjective state of being into account, aggregative, that focuses on the sum of actions, and consequentialism, where an action is primarily judged based on its consequences.

In line with these characteristics of utilitarianism, three criticisms can be raised. The first one is related to its welfarist characteristic that focuses on people's subjective state of being (e.g. happiness, desire, life satisfaction in some contemporary research). This characteristic points out that the utilitarian account exclusively judges the goodness of people's state of being through personal-utility (Sen, 1979a, p. 468, 1979b, p. 205), which means that non-utility information is not a concern when assessing their (dis)advantages. Consider a woman, for instance, who is happy despite being paid less than a man in return for doing the same job. Any non-utility information (e.g. certain moral obligations such as "equal pay for equal work") is irrelevant in the assessment of

this woman's (dis)advantage *vis-à-vis* (dis)advantage of her male counterpart. By the utilitarian reckoning, as long as they are equal in the utility calculus, (e.g. happiness or job satisfaction), no injustice is identified. Yet, people's mental state is socially conditioned, and life satisfaction of the poor is usually distorted. As Sen pointed out (1985a, p. 17), if a woman is either a "broken unemployed", "tamed housewife", or "hopeless destitute", she could "happily" be employed despite being paid less than a man for the same job. Therefore, taking a subjective state as the exclusive informational basis for the assessment of an action yields inconsistent and unreliable results. The second concern is associated with the utilitarianism's aggregative characteristic. Focusing on the total utility without any sensitivity as to how this utility is distributed among people whose advantages are to be considered underlines utilitarianism's sum-ranking calculus. This means that it focuses on the total utility information in which utilities of different people are simply summed together to evaluate their aggregate interests, but no attention is paid to the actual distribution (e.g. utilitarian estimation of overall welfare of citizens through GDP calculations of countries). This characteristic illustrates that the utilitarian account is insensitive to intra-group inequalities (e.g. how this GDP is distributed among citizens). Lastly, as a consequentialist and majoritarian approach, utilitarianism is an end-focused perspective. It judges every action with respect to its outcome regardless of how this outcome is achieved. For instance, if the violation of certain rights of some tends to generate a greater happiness for a greater number of people, the utilitarian account exercises no judgment on the legitimacy of these violations. However, the process of achieving fair outcomes cannot be restricted to the perspective of "majorities interest". Certain rights of people (e.g. freedom of speech) are indispensable constituents of their advantage and cannot be taken away on the ground of "majorities decision/interest", which can otherwise potentially lead to the "tyranny of the majority" (Tocqueville, 1840/2004, p. 301).

Contrary to the utilitarian account, the libertarian approach to justice is a consequence-independent model. It is a reformulation of classical liberal doctrines that justifies inequalities in outcome based on the principles of "just acquisition", "holding of property" and "transfer of holding". One contemporary leading figure of the libertarian approach - Robert Nozick - proposes three principles governing the process of distribution:

> "(1) If a person acquires a holding in accordance with justice, then this person is entitled to this holding. (2) If a holding transferred to a person from someone else entitled this holding before and, thus, acquired by this person in accordance with justice, then this person is entitled to this holding. (3) Anyone is entitled to a holding unless the implications of principle one and two" (Nozick, 1974, p. 151).

The moral foundation of these principles has its origins in Locke's self-ownership argument that briefly claims everyone should be entitled to holding the fruits of their own labor (Locke, 1689/1956, Ch.5). Assume, for example, a person who finds something (e.g. a stick) that is abundant in nature and accessible by everyone else too. If s/he turns it into something useful (e.g. a spear) through her labor and skill, then s/he should be able to hold the property of its fruits (e.g. a deer hunted with the spear). This is a view that specifies one's "labor and skill" as the space of evaluation for resource distribution. The modern libertarian model of just distribution, similar to Locke's argument, recognizes one's acquisition just as long as it is acquired through a person's labor and skill. An implication of this view is, inevitably, that individuals are considered as the only responsible party in their actions, which underlines that people should be entitled to the

outcomes of their actions, regardless of (un)desirability of such outcomes. Justice, in this regard, is ensured by giving precedence to the formula that "from each according to what he chooses to do, to each according to what he makes for himself (…) and what others choose to do for him and choose to give him" (Nozick, 1974, p. 160). In this line of reasoning, the poor, for example, are not victims who suffer from the implications of certain social and economic arrangements, but as rational actors who deserve their particular conditions as a consequence of their own choices (Lister, 2004, pp. 127–128). According to the libertarian view, inequalities and their (un)desirable outcomes (e.g. being poor or rich) are justified based on a meritocratic judgement that claims there is no injustice in outcome when everyone is equal in holding the same rights from the start, even though some earn a lot more than others by combining their merits with equally given rights so as to turn something into a valuable commodity. Taxing the rich to re-distribute resources for social policies from which the poor benefit, for example, is an injustice since it means penalizing those who have succeeded in effectively combining their skills and labor with equally given entitlements (e.g. right to free entrepreneurship) that the poor have not managed effectively. In short, the modern libertarian approach to just distribution advocates a person's entitlement to holding properties which s/he acquires through her/his merits.

Sen's criticism of the libertarian view is primarily a questioning of why libertarianism bestows an uncompromising priority on personal liberties (Sen, 1985c, p. 217) such as "acquisition" or "holding". Sen considers this as deeply problematic since "the actual consequences of the operation of these entitlements can, quite possibly, include rather terrible results" (Sen, 1999, p. 66). In his examination of large-scale famines, Sen concludes that some famines can occur without any decline in the quantity of food production or violation of anyone's libertarian entitlements (Sen, 1983a). However, since the libertarian justification is consequence-independent, it takes no notice of these undesired outcomes as long as individuals' libertarian rights are not violated. Therefore, its "ethical acceptability" says Sen (1993, p. 526), "is open to severe questioning".

Apart from Sen's criticisms, I also argue that there is a serious problem with the contemporary libertarian interpretation of Locke's self-ownership argument. Locke defended the idea of self-ownership that claims a person's entitlement to holding fruits of her/his own skill and labor. Yet, the contemporary libertarian interpretation does not draw any line between "one's entitlement to holding the fruits of her/his own labor" and "one's entitlement to holding the impersonal inputs" that are used to produce such fruits. For example, one can claim that producers' production of a good (e.g. wheat) only justifies their entitlement with regards to their contribution to the output, but not to their ownership of impersonal productive inputs (e.g. land). Yet, there is a leap left unjustified in the contemporary libertarian view that extends Locke's argument to one's entitlement to holding impersonal resources (e.g. land ownership). Second, an individual merit is not inborn, but earned within social process. This means that skills that help a person to climb the social ladder are social products. One can have valuable entrepreneurial skills and be meritorious in running a business with the help of education s/he gains through her/his participation in a business school, which is a social process. One can also earn a similar skill through a transfer of knowledge from her/his family who has been running a business, which is also a social process. So, distribution based on merits ignores the socially conditioned nature of being meritorious and the background inequalities in earning valuable skills.

The Rawlsian model of social justice that is known as "the justice as fairness" (Rawls, 2001) can be considered to be a model that aims to combine egalitarian and liberal concerns of distribution. Justice, in the Rawlsian model, is considered a "virtue of institutions" (Rawls, 1971/2005, p.

586) rather than a "virtue of individuals" upon which the libertarian model builds its arguments. For example, while poverty is discussed in relation to the individual's faulty conducts in the libertarian view, the focus of discussion is on the basic social/institutional structure of society in the Rawlsian approach. Therefore, the Rawlsian model should be considered a political conception of justice (see Rawls, 2001, p. 12), rather than a comprehensive moral doctrine.

Drawing on some hypothetical devices of impartiality that are "original position" (Rawls, 2003, pp. 15–19) and the "veil of ignorance" (ibid. 118-23), Rawls attempts to specify principles of justice that should govern the process of distribution. Rawls invites parties, who have different conceptions of the good life, to join a discussion in their "original position". In their original position, parties stand behind a veil of ignorance where they have no knowledge of each other's social position. Rawls' aim in this endeavor is to introduce a hypothetical state that aligns his theory with a principle of political liberalism that does not favor any normative conception of the good. He assumes that parties do not have any interest to favor any one particular conception of the good or to pursue vested interests when they are in an "original position"; therefore, according to him, they are unconstrained when specifying principles of justice that are fair not only for themselves but for others as well. According to him, such a method would inevitably result in the following principles that secure a fair process of distribution:

> (I) Each person has an equal right to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic rights and liberties, which scheme is compatible with a similar scheme for all.
> (II) Social and economic inequalities are to satisfy two conditions: first, they must be attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity; and second, they must be to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society" (Rawls, 1985, p. 227).

Rawls considers the first principle, which guarantees basic political liberties for everyone, having priority over the second principle, which arranges distribution in power and wealth. According to Rawls, a just society is one where these principles are applied to the basic institutional structure of society to fairly distribute the "social primary goods" that are "things that every rational man is presumed to want (…) whatever a person's rational plan of life" (2003, p. 54) and as the "all-purpose means that are necessary (…) to pursue their determinate conceptions of the good" (2001, p. 57). Rawls identifies five categories of primary goods as basic rights and liberties; freedom of movement and free choice of occupation; powers and prerogatives of offices and positions of authority and responsibility; income and wealth; and the social bases of self-respect[1]. In Rawls' "well-ordered society", the first two categories of the primary goods are equally guaranteed to everyone due to the first principle having priority over the second principle. Following this, everyone is given an equal chance to access the third category of primary goods based on the first part of the second principle, which points out Rawls' leaning towards a meritocratic reward system in the frame of equality of opportunity. It is only after these conditions are satisfied that the second part of the second principle –known as "the difference principle" that aims to compensate disadvantages of the worse-off by redistributing the fourth category of primary goods, namely income and wealth– can come into play. In the end, according to Rawls, people will become treated fairly, and hence secure the fifth group of social primary goods that is the social bases of self-respect.

1 For the contents of these categories: (Rawls, 1993, pp. 308–309).

While framing his capability approach, Sen directs several criticisms at Rawls' model by stressing its transcendental nature (Sen, 2009, pp. 8–10, 2008, pp. 336–337), the importance that it attaches to personal liberties *vis-à-vis* economic rights (Sen, 1999, pp. 63–65, 2009, pp. 65), and its focus on the means of good living instead of the "actual living that people manage to achieve" (Sen, 1999, p. 73, 1992, p. 84). However, Sen's primary criticism of the Rawlsian model can be pointed out as that "Rawls takes primary goods as the embodiment of advantage" (Sen, 1979b, p. 216). In other words, Rawls presupposes that equal holdings of primary goods yield equal advantage in achieving a good life. However, the different social and personal characteristics of people lead to considerable interpersonal variation in their conversion of Rawls' "social primary goods" and, bring inequalities in the achievement of people's own conception of a good life. As an example, "in the context of inequality between women and men (…) biological as well as social factors (related to pregnancy, neonatal care, conventional household roles, and so on) can place a woman at a disadvantage even when she has exactly the same bundle of primary goods as a man" (Sen, 1990a, p. 116). Therefore, for Sen, "if the object is to concentrate on the individual's real opportunity to pursue her objectives, then account would have to be taken not only of the primary goods the person holds, but also of the relevant personal characteristics that govern the conversion of primary goods into the person's ability to promote her ends" (Sen, 1997, p. 198). Sen claims that Rawls' model is substantially sensitive to the inter-end variation[2] in line with a pluralistic liberal conception of justice, yet it falls short of taking inter-individual variation[3] into account (Sen, 1992, pp. 85–86).

Looking at the three approaches above, we can notice that they have a common theme. Although their propositions for the just distribution of resources are quite different, each of them is constructed on an assumption that one way or another disregards the diversity of social reality and considers human beings as perfectly equal to each other. For example, we can notice an assumption in the utilitarian view that everyone's level of happiness can be perfectly equal in return for equal distribution. We can also notice an underlying assumption in the libertarian view that everyone is perfectly equal in developing necessary merits (e.g. skills) that steer them to demonstrate meritorious achievements. Similarly, the Rawlsian model is also based on an assumption that everyone is perfectly equal in terms of their abilities to convert the social primary goods so as to follow their own concept of the good life. However, such underlying assumptions are shattered by the realities of social diversities.

3. An Idea of Justice without Perfectionism: The Capability Approach

Human beings, as social actors of different classes, genders, ethnicities, ages and so forth are not exactly the same. Nor are the configuration of social/institutional contexts surrounding their lives. Thus, a transcendental principle of justice that proposes to evaluate all individuals as they are perfectly same inevitably yields injustices in our imperfectly configured diverse social world. Amartya Sen, the leading figure in the capability approach, boldly underlines various diversities of our social world (1992, pp. 1–4, 1999, pp. 69–70) where the equal treatment to diverse individuals can lead to inequalities. According to him, on the face of various diversities, to define a uniquely just society is neither feasible nor essential (Sen, 2008, pp.336–340, 2009, pp. 15–18). Thus, he prefers to argue in favour of an idea of comparative justice since a "perfectly just society

2 Different conceptions of the good life that different people have.

3 People's different characteristics that lead to variation in their abilities to convert resources into achievement.

is not going to be established on the face of the earth any time soon; we shall therefore need a theory of justice for an imperfect world –to help us move from 'more unjust' to 'less unjust' states of affair– but transcendental theory would not help in this comparative exercise" (Osmani, 2010, p. 600).

The capability approach advocates the idea that the primary objective of social arrangements should be based on the expansion of people's capability to achieve beings and doings so that they attain value (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009, p. 31; Alkire, 2005, p.122, 2008, p. 28). Sen emphasizes that "individual advantage is judged in the capability approach by a person's capability to do things he or she has reason to value. (…) The focus here is on the freedom that a person actually has to do this or be that –things that he or she may value doing or being" (Sen, 2009, pp. 231–232). Accordingly, in the capability approach, an individual's ability to do or be things s/he values is considered the primary space of evaluation to assess her/his (dis)advantage (Sen, 1999, p. 74), or whether the society is just or not. This approach to the analysis of (dis)advantage is built upon on a simple and easily observable claim that a person's (dis)advantage depends not only on what s/he possess (e.g. rights/entitlements, commodities, income, or social primary goods), but also how much s/he can substantively make use of her/his possessions in practice, since resources are simply *means* to achieve valued ends. In this regard, according to the capability approach, the assessment of people's (dis)advantage cannot be limited to resource ownership, but should be extended to an assessment of the extent to which people can make use of their resources to achieve their valued *ends*. Offering to veer away from what we may call "commodity fetishism", Sen (1983b, p. 160) illustrates the significance of such a perspective by a simple example of bike ownership: the significance of a bike is not, in essence, associated with ownership, but rather in what its characteristic affords, *viz.*, transportation. Possession of a bike is significant, as long as it enables the owner's movement from one place to another. Here, the capability approach distinguishes the means of a person's advantage (e.g. bike) from the functions of these means (e.g. being mobile). In the capability literature, the functions of means are conceptualized as *functionings* reflecting "the various things a person may value doing or being" (Sen, 1999, p. 75) such as being mobile, educated, healthy, employed, respected, and so forth. Instead of placing the resource ownership at the center of assessment, the capability approach advocates assessing people's (dis)advantage in terms of their freedom, or capability, to achieve functionings that they value.

Following this distinguishing the means from their functionings, the capability approach stresses that people's achievement of functionings can vary in relation not only to resources they hold but also to quite a number of *inter-individual variations* that lead to "variation in the relationship between resources (…) and freedom to pursue ends" (Sen, 1990a, p. 120, 1992, p. 85). Inter-individual variations, in the capability approach, are conceptualized as *conversion factors* which are considered as factors affecting people's ability to convert their resources into achievement of functionings. In other words, they are considered to be various diversities (e.g. age, gender, body size, pregnancy and so forth) that can potentially lead to a variation in people's ability to convert their resources into something that they value to achieve. For example, "a person may have more income and more nutritional intake, but less freedom to live a well-nourished existence because of a higher basal metabolic rate, greater vulnerability to parasitic diseases, larger body size, or simply because of pregnancy" (Sen, 1992, pp. 81–82). Thus, moving forward from the space of resources to the space of functionings in the assessment of people's (dis)advantage requires taking notice of various diversities that potentially lead to variation in people's achievement of functionings or their valued ends.

In addition to the inter-individual variations, the capability approach also addresses the *inter-end variation* that refers to different conceptions of the good life among people (see Sen, 1990a, p. 120, 1992, p. 85), such as secular or religious life styles that different people may prefer to embrace. Recognizing the value of different conceptions of the good life for different people, the capability approach does not advocate any particular form of the good. This, in the approach's own terms, means a recognition that people themselves should be in charge of identification of what functionings are valuable for themselves and thus, a recognition of people's freedom to form their own ends and lifestyles (see Sen, 2009, p. 233-238). This is obviously a characteristic that aims to gain the approach an ethically and politically liberal nature.

However, the ultimate concern of the capability approach is not people's conversion of resource and achievements of functionings that they value, but is their *ability* to achieve functionings, or their *capability*. The difference between the former and the latter is associated with choice or free-will. To illustrate this let us take the functioning of being well-nourished. It is a broadly agreed that being adequately nourished is a necessary and thus a valuable functioning regardless of what particular type of lifestyle people embrace. Yet, according to the capability approach, we ought to distinguish between those who choose not to achieve this functioning due to, say, fasting based on a religious reason, political objectives, or aesthetic concerns, and those who cannot achieve it due to lack of food while comparing their (dis)advantages. In both cases, being adequately nourished is not properly achieved; yet there is a significant difference in advantage of those who fast and those who lack food, since fasting "is choosing to starve when one does have other options" (Sen, 1992, p. 52). Here we again see the liberal nature of the capability approach that ascribes an intrinsic value to the idea of freedom that is considered in a form of agency, free-will, or choice (see Sen, 1988, pp. 289–293, 1992, p. 41). This leads the capability approach to argue that people should be free to choose and live the life that they value, even though their choices in some cases may give rise to an actual reduction in their material well-being (see Sen, 1985b, pp. 203–208, 1992, pp. 59–62, 2009, pp. 286–290) such as starving.

Briefly, Sen's capability approach, *inter alia,* is an analytical framework that allows involving various diversities of social reality for a comparative analysis of (dis)advantage. Emphasizing both the inter-individual and inter-end variations among people, it takes a critical position against both the generic abstract models of justice and the axiomatic notion of rational/economic actor both of which consider people's unequal possession of resources (e.g. rights, income, social primary goods) as the primary space of evaluation to assess their (dis)advantageous conditions. Drawing on an authentic conceptual framework (e.g. functionings, conversion factors, capability), the capability approach argues that such models one way or another unduly neglect social diversities of human beings as well as their varied institutional circumstances, which eventually aligns it with certain sociological understandings of inequality. Therefore, the capability approach is conventionally described as "a sociological turn" (Robeyns, 2006, p. 371) in the relevant literature. However, I argue that this is not a fully-deserved description.

4. Beyond the Conventional: A Sociological Criticism of the Capability Approach

Emphasizing both the diversity of valued functionings and the variability of people's routes to achievement of the good life, Sen's conception of social justice is, to a certain extent, in alignment with sociological understandings of inequality that stress the diverse and situational nature of social practices of the social actor. We can illustrate Sen's alignment with sociological understanding of inequalities in diverse ways. To illustrate this, we can point out his emphasis on the

limits of "pure theory" detached from social context (Sen, 2004, p. 78) and the variability of requirements of achieving a good life in different "social climates" (Sen, 2006b, pp. 36–37, 1992, pp. 114–116, 1999, pp. 72–74). His criticism of Rawls, which underlines the diversity of social, environmental, and personal characteristics of people leading to variation in converting primary goods into the achievement of a good life, can also be considered as another example of his alignment with a sociological understanding of inequalities (Sen, 1992, pp. 85–87, 2009, pp. 260–262). His criticism of utilitarian welfarism that ignores a socially conditioned nature of desires and preferences (Sen, 1985a, p. 12, 1985b, pp. 188–191, 1987, p. 15, 1990b, p. 127) is also compatible with a sociological interpretation of how people's desires and preference are formed in relation to the unjust social structure. In this regard, addressing Sen's capability approach as a "sociological turn", *vis-à-vis* utilitarian, libertarian and Rawlsian models, does not seem totally misleading. However, apart from some conventional criticisms to his approach (e.g. Dean, 2009; Deneulin, 2005; Deneulin & McGregor, 2010; Evans, 2002; Hill, 2003; Navarro, 2000; Sandbrook, 2000; Sayer, 2012), I claim that this is not a fully-deserved characteristic. My primary argument that underpins this claim is that Sen draws on sociological accounts of *the social actor* and underlines the significance of social diversities primarily to criticize rival frameworks of justice, rather than giving such an account any more extended place in constructing his own authentic argument that is still significantly prone to an axiomatic and abstract notion of *the rational actor*.

As stressed above, the capability approach claims that a just society is one where people are capable of achieving what they value to be and do. While Sen criticizes the utilitarian space of evaluation (happiness, desire-fulfilment or preference satisfaction), he points out a sociological fact that people's mental states can be conditioned by social structure and thus, we cannot rely on people's happiness, desires or satisfaction in reflecting on justice. However, the difference between people's desires and their values is not clear in his works. That is to say that what people value, similar to what they desire, can also be socially conditioned and cannot be relied on while reflecting on justice. Therefore, Sen attempted to correct this potential problem by proposing that we should not simply rely on what people value, but also aim to scrutinize their values by looking at whether their valuation is "reasoned":

> In doing a scrutinized valuation -central to the account I am concentrating on- the need for scrutiny is built in, but scrutiny does not get its due when pleasures or desires are simply taken as the basis of moral or political calculation. The difference lies in the need for critical assessment and scrutiny for reasoned valuation, which differs (…) from just tallying pleasures or desires (this also explains, by the way, why I speak so much about 'reason to value'…) (Sen, 2006a, p. 92).

Precisely because values may be conditioned, Sen frequently emphasizes the phrase "reason to value" (e.g. Sen, 2009, p. 231). Thus, his final argument evolves into that a just society is one where people are able to achieve what they have *reason to value* to be and do. Accordingly, Sen, who criticizes the utilitarian space of evaluation by stressing the socially conditioned nature of desires and preferences in line with a sociological understanding of *the social actor*, returns to an economical understanding of *the rational actor* whose values are supposed to be reasoned while he constructs his own alternative argument against the utilitarian space of evaluation. While doing so, however, Sen neither identifies what qualifies a person's reason as an admissible reason nor explains how we should evaluate this reason. Thus, such an understanding of the rational actor

who is supposed to have an admissible reason to value something falls short within the realm of intricate social relations and contended nature of diverse understandings of the good life. Consider, for example, a religious person who values the banning of food consumption in public spaces during Ramadan and points out the religious doctrine s/he embraces as a reason behind this valuation. How should we evaluate such valuation and reasoning while deciding if s/he should be entitled to achieve this valuation at the expense of other's valuation to consume food in public space? Consider a person living in currently polarized atmosphere of Turkey and valuing not living with Kurds[4] and rationalizes this valuation based on a view that Kurds are "purse-snatchers", "robbers", "benefit scroungers", and "murderers" (see Saracoglu, 2010, pp. 247–255)[5]. What, according to Sen's capability approach, makes this person's valuation and reasoning inadmissible? Consider the case of a black woman who values skin-bleaching based on the aesthetic reason of having a lighter skin tone that is considered as "beautiful and attractive" in her social context (see Fokuo, 2009, pp. 139–140; Hunter, 2007, pp. 246–249). How should we evaluate such valuation and reasoning while deciding if she ought to be capable to achieve having a lighter skin-tone in order to be acknowledged as "beautiful and attractive" in her social context? We can find similar cases that are not so easy to evaluate within the present framework of Sen's approach, unless it incorporates a sociological perspective that focuses on, for example, what social and institutional mechanisms lead the black women to ascribe "having a light(er) skin tone" a meaning of "being beautiful and attractive". Or, what social and institutional configurations of society in Turkey lead some to develop an image of Kurds that is associated with crimes like purse-snatching or benefit scroungers. In brief, Sen's approach recognizes the importance of critical scrutiny of people's values. However, it does not take into account that people's reasonings, similar to their values, are also socially conditioned. Thus, Sen does not aim to explain what makes a reason an admissible one, nor offers us any analytical framework to evaluate these reasons. However, a sociological perspective on the formation of people's reasonings behind their valuation would not ignore the fact that neither people's values nor their reasonings in valuing a being or doing is immune to the influence of their social and institutional surroundings.

There is another example that also illustrates an insufficient use of a sociologically informed perspective in the analytical texture of the capability approach. As I stressed in the previous section, people's achievement of what they have reason to value is primarily discussed in relation to the conversion factors[6] that influence their ability to convert resources into the achievement of functionings. This emphasis by Sen constitutes his main analytical criticism of the Rawlsian model of justice that is, according to him, blind to inter-individual diversities. However, I argue that his proposition needs further clarification of what these factors might be and why/how they operate in relation to the social/institutional contexts of our modern societies.

4 An empirical research conducted in 59 cities of Turkey revealed that 47,4 percent of Turkish respondents does not want to live nearby Kurds (KONDA, 2011) at the time of the research conducted.

5 I should note a clarifying reservation that some other researches whose findings conflict with the finding of the KONDA's research can be referred to. Thus, based on such researches, we can point out a significantly big proportion of Turkish society that does not share such a stigmatising view on the Kurdish population of Turkey whilst openly express their will to live with harmony and peace all together. However, such references do not invalidate the main claim presented here that the capability approach falls short in responding how to assess such distorted valuation of some people that primarily arises from a stigmatising view on a particular ethnic group within a polarised social atmosphere.

6 Note that Sen mostly uses the term "sources of diversity" to point out these factors in his works (see Sen, 1992, 1999).

To demonstrate the inadequacy of Rawls' primary goods, Sen for example refers to the significance of people's diverse characteristics leading to a variation in the conversion of primary goods and gives us an account of what these factors of conversion might be (see Sen, 1992, p. 27). He stresses that "conversion problems can involve some extremely complex social issues, especially when the achievements in question are influenced by intricate intragroup relations and interactions" (Ibid. 33). However, he does not say much about what these "extremely complex social issues" might be. Instead, he confines himself to vaguely stress "physical differences" such as "metabolic rates, gender, pregnancy, climatic environment, exposure to parasitic diseases and so on" (Ibid.). More recently, he provided a clearer account of the conversion factors and identified the five categories as "personal heterogeneities" (e.g. age, gender, disability), "diversities in the physical environment" (e.g. climatic circumstances), "variations in social climate" (e.g. prevalence or absence of crime and violence, the nature of community relationships), "differences in relational perspectives" (e.g. established patterns of behavior in a community), and "distribution within the family" (e.g. distributional rules followed within the family) (Sen, 1999, pp. 70–71, 2009, pp. 254–257). However, these categories are still too vague and abstract to be an analytical tool in the examination of people's achievement of good life. For example, "established patterns of behavior in a community" or "the nature of community relationships" are very broad categories in which countless factors can be placed. Besides, there are clearly some overlaps between Sen's categories. It is difficult, for instance, to distinguish "the nature of community relationships" from "conventions and customs". Moreover, it is impossible to examine the influences of what Sen calls "personal heterogeneities" (e.g. gender or age) without any reference to "social climate" or to the "distributional rules followed within the family". Therefore, both identification and classification of conversion factors in Sen's works are too vague, which is mostly because of the lack of sociologically-informed perspective in constructing his own alternative proposition.

The lack of sociologically-informed perspective in Sen's conceptualisation of conversion factors reveals itself more clearly as we look at what he calls "personal heterogeneities" (Sen, 1999, p. 70, 2009, p. 255) such as "age", "disability", "pregnancy", "gender". Such factors lead to variations in people's achievement of the good life mainly because of specific configurations of institutional policies, or the operation of particular social norms in our modern societies. This is to say that neither "age" nor "disability" is a conversion factor on its own; but they *become* conversion factors due to the particular configuration of societies. For example, a person of advanced years' inability to access public transportation is not associated with her/his age in essence, but is because of the given configuration of our institutional policies that do not regulate the public transportation services in an old-age-friendly form. Accordingly, such a sociological perspective that underlines the role of institutional structure suggests that all factors leading to variation in the achievement of the good life are in essence social/institutional, but not "personal". On the other hand, Sen's (1992, p. 20) classification of these factors as "purely individual" (see ibid.27), or "personal heterogeneities" is not simply a problem of taxonomy. But, it demonstrates an insufficient employment of a sociologically-informed perspective in identifying and conceptualizing the conversion factors.

An implication of such a vague conceptualisation that suffers from the lack of a sociologically-informed perspective appears in the empirical literature on the capability approach in the form of insufficent attention to the social/instutitonal causes of (dis)advantage. The vague identification of conversion factors has led to the emergence of empirical literature that mostly focuses on inequalities across varied differences (e.g. age or gender groups) of people in their achievement of

certain opportunities. This type of research usually informs us about *who* the disadvantaged groups are; but, they do not sufficiently discuss *why* and *how* these groups are disadvantaged. Thus, we do not know *why* or *how* social/institutional dynamics lead to variations across people's social identities in the framework of the capability approach. In other words, the question that is usually left unaddressed is why and how social/institutional arrangements turn people's differences into the diversities of inequalities. So, although the existing capability literature tells us who the (dis)advantaged ones are, it says very little about why and how they have become (dis) advantaged. For example, by looking at the national dataset, we can see variation between various groups' (e.g. woman and man) achievements of certain functionings (e.g. education and employment). Based on this, we can reflect on who the disadvantaged one is. Yet, such analysis only provides us with an identification of a disadvantaged group, rather than explaining how and why this group became disadvantaged. Considering this from a policy perspective, it can be said that, comparing to some other frameworks of justice and inequalities, the capability approach currently provides a more advanced and nuanced analysis of who the disadvantaged ones are. But, it does not, in its present framework, sufficiently inform us how to tackle these disadvantages socially or institutionally.

5. Conclusion

The existing theoretical literature on social justice is contested with a quite a number of convincing perspectives that mostly focus on specifying the space of evaluation that should govern the process of resource allocation. Among these theories of social justice, three mainstream approaches, namely the utilitarian, libertarian and Rawlsian models, point out the significance of different spaces of evaluation such as utility (considered to be happiness or different forms of subjective well-being), entitlements (considered to be the rights to acquire and hold possession) and fairness (considered to be the ownership of social primary goods distributed in accordance with the principle of justice as fairness). Drawing on a sociological account of various diversities, the capability approach criticizes these theories by underlining limitations of, for example, subjective wellbeing, entitlement of acquiring and having possessions as well as the distribution of social primary goods. Such a perspective of diversity that the capability approach employs leads to the emergence of an understanding that symbolizes a "sociological turn" in the existing literature on social justice where a number of theories are usually built upon an assumption that both individuals and their social surroundings are perfectly similar. Although it has been criticized from different perspectives that broadly underline its various drawbacks (such as Dean, 2009; Deneulin, 2005; Deneulin & McGregor, 2010; Evans, 2002; Hill, 2003; Navarro, 2000; Sandbrook, 2000; Sugden, 2006; Sayer, 2012), the capability approach has managed to gain a distinctive place in both theoretical and empirical literature on social justice by employing an account of sociological diversities. However, focusing on its analytical proposals that most of the critical assessments of the capability approach have significantly overlooked so far, I argued that the approach mostly employs such a sociological account when it criticizes the existing rivalry perspectives in the contemporary literature of justice, rather than in the process of making up its own alternative authentic proposal. To underpin this argument, I critically evaluate the analytical texture of the primary claim of the capability approach that proposes to assess justice in relation to an individual's ability to achieve what s/he has reason to value to be and do. In this critical evaluation, I firstly discussed that although the capability approach criticizes the utilitarian account with its blindness to the unreliability of people's desires and preferences due to existing structur-

al inequalities, it avoids acknowledging the various roles of structural inequalities that also form and distort people's reasonings in valuing a being or doing. Secondly, I looked to Sen's primary claim against the Rawlsian account of justice that stresses Rawls' blindness to inter-individual diversities. In this discussion, I stressed that although Sen draws on a sociological account of human diversity to demonstrate shortfalls of Rawlsian account of justice, it pays insufficient attention to various sociological diversities in conceptualising its own analytical argument that is about people's unevenness in converting their possessions into something that they have reason to value. Based on such discussion in this paper, I have claimed that although Sen's capability approach is termed a "sociological turn" in the literature of justice, this is not a fully-deserved characteristic since it does not give a sociologically-informed perspective sufficient place in configuring its own authentic proposal.

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