

ten filled instead by nationalism. The reason is that both the ideology and practice of nationalism can be easily mobilised, even more so when supported by part of the elites (p. 109). We can only add that the Czech experience shows how the selective memory actually works and how old mythologies can re-emerge in new contexts. A thorough study of transformation is thus required which would reach deeper into the communist past without clichés and partiality. This book certainly moves in just such a highly useful direction.

Jiří Večerník

Sabina Alkire: *Valuing Freedoms: Sen's Capability Approach and Poverty Reduction*

Oxford 2003: Oxford University Press,
240 pp.

Growing out of his brilliant *Poverty and Famines* (1981), Amartya Sen has formulated what has come to be called 'the capabilities approach' (CA) and has subsequently, in a flood of papers and books, applied this approach to issues of poverty, human well-being and development with such energy and influence that it earned him the Nobel Prize in economics. The essential argument of the approach is that the social good should be expressed in human capabilities rather than in utility or income. That argument has proved persuasive and fruitful in spite of the paradox that no one knows just what the capabilities approach is, except in very general terms.

In *Valuing Freedoms* Sabina Alkire sets out to explain it, or rather 'to operationalise it'. That she does in a dense, deep and exceedingly learned book that draws on economics, philosophy, jurisprudence, sociology and many other sources. The CA is tested theoretically in Part I and practically in Part II.

Capabilities are about functionings, and functionings are valuable beings and doings,

the things a person might value. The goodness of a person's life depends on her freedom to promote/achieve/accomplish valuable functionings. That's the guts of CA, and from there the approach can move in many directions. How should it be taken forward more precisely? Sen has point-blank refused to answer. He consistently treats the approach as pluralistic and incomplete, as non-closed, and insists that it is this openness that makes it fruitful. Not surprisingly, others have been critical – and the whole intangibility of the approach is a provocation to anyone who wants theory to impose a strict order on the universe – but the influence of the approach vindicates Sen's refusal to tie it down.

There are philosophical reasons for leaving the approach open-ended. Well-being just is not made up of one thing and one thing only. Normal people value many things and not all the things we value are necessarily ordered on a neat scale from more to less wanted. It is just a mistake to reduce all the things people want to any single final value. An open-ended theory is therefore faithful to the reality people live in, and it is really at ordered and not messy theories we should aim our fire.

But there is also another reason why Sen's approach is deliberately messy – or so one comes to feel while reading Alkire. The approach is more an exercise in criticism than in theory building. Its foundation is fundamentally negative: a relentless criticism of utilitarian economics. When the approach started to emerge, utilitarianism was the foundation on which mainstream economics stood. That foundation had just the quality of order that the capabilities approach lacks: a beautifully logical edifice of utility-maximising human robots. The feeling of owning a perfect theory had persuaded the economics profession that it was right in all things when it was in fact wrong in many, including its chosen assumptions about human nature and well-being. It is dangerous to believe oneself right when one is wrong, and economics

did often err in its practical advice, not least development economics. The way to improve on a theory that believes itself to know more than it is possible to know, is not to put in another theory of the same ilk, but to face up to the fact that a good theory leaves unanswered what theory cannot answer.

The point of the capabilities approach has been more to shift the foundations of economics than to resolve this or that practical matter, and that it has done. Exit utilitarian economics. That is a point worth making in a sociological journal at a time when many sociologists want to create order in their universe with the help of 'rational choice theory' – which is just another name for the old theory that economists, with Sen's help, have for their part consigned to the rubbish heap of history.

Nevertheless, if freedom and capabilities are now to be the foundations of economic and social thinking, how do we go on to make more practical use of that very general platform? Alkire asks three questions:

1. If it's about capabilities, just what are those capabilities?
2. If capabilities are many things, and not a single vector such as utility, how do we handle this multi-dimensionality?
3. If we have to deal with some kind of list of capabilities, how can we single out those that are the most basic?

To answer the first question she identifies thirty-nine lists of dimensions of human development in the literature. These are discussed at length and summarised in a large table. Out of that discussion one can read that all these authors, who have of course worked seriously and earnestly to uncover what it is that makes for improvements in the human condition, have come to totally different answers, both philosophically and practically. Pluralism is no doubt good, but this total lack of any common ground is discouraging.

The summary table is an eye-opener. Looking through it again and again, one cannot help feeling, for no want of underlying re-

search and books, that all these lists are taken out of thin air. Is 'sexual gratification' an element in a list of human aspirations? Some include it, others not, and some in coded language. Sen himself has not entered this competition, having decided early on in his project (*Inequality Reexamined*, 1992) that capabilities, although the building blocks of his approach, are not directly observable.

The second question is 'the index problem'. If well-being is made up of several things, can we pull all these things together into a single aggregate measure? A single measure is useful for both analytic and political purposes, but Alkire quickly concludes that no index of capabilities is possible. This is of course central to what the capabilities approach is about, and in particular what it is against – utilitarian economics that takes material wealth to be the measure of all things – and Sen's view is that indexing is to impose on data an order that does not exist in the world. It is not the way we measure well-being that is multi-dimensional, but the reality we measure. An index would measure something that does not exist.

The way to deal with multi-dimensionality, suggests Alkire, is through participation. It is people themselves who must resolve how to weigh against each other the elements of well-being and that can only be done through participatory processes. Here I find a shortcoming in the book. It does not refer to the now extensive literature on 'deliberative democracy', which addresses exactly the question of how to move democratically from a pluralism of ends to practical decisions about means.

The third question takes us directly to the question of poverty and the literature on basic needs. If there are some capabilities that are basic, it must be those that determine poverty or not. The relative theory of poverty suggests that there is no universal list of basic capabilities in that sense. The determinants of poverty are relative to time and place. That view Sen has attacked very strongly, asserting that there is 'an irreducible core of absolute pov-

ty' in the very idea of poverty. If so, what is that core? Sen, characteristically, has not volunteered an answer directly, but Alkire has extracted a list of capabilities from his work. According to Alkire, in Sen's view, absolute poverty is the inability:

- to meet nutritional requirements
- to escape avoidable disease
- to be educated
- to be clothed
- to be able to travel
- and sometimes
- to live without shame
- to participate in the activities of the community
- to have self-respect (to be happy).

Whether that list is evidence of the usefulness of the capabilities approach for poverty analysis, or of its ability to add to our practical understanding of basic needs, is perhaps not entirely obvious.

In Part II, Alkire moves to three case studies of small-scale development projects in Pakistan and explores how the capabilities approach can be used to assess their impact. Her method is to start from economic cost-benefit analysis and then ask what the CA may have to add in very practical assessments on the ground. These case studies are detailed and beautifully laid out, so it is impossible to do them justice in a brief review. Her conclusion is that the CA adds decisively to the conventional economic approach. In projects where no economic benefit is identified there may still be significant benefits in freedom, capabilities and empowerment.

However, there is no way to learn directly from the CA how to actually make that assessment. The approach offers only the typical sociological advice of considering more than straight economic factors and listening to people and their own experiences (participatory processes again), and then leave it more or less up to common sense to decide how actually to go about this.

How operational, then, is the capabilities approach? The answer must be, not very.

But also that this does not matter. The approach has great power to inspire a way of thinking about well-being and human progress. That inspiration flows easily into practical application. For previous evidence see the now influential annual *Human Development Reports* of the United Nations Development Programme, inspired by the CA but not in any direct way extracted from it. Alkire's experience in project assessment is the same. The CA suggests a direction of analysis, but can tell no one just how to do it.

Stein Ringen

Jan-Erik Lane, Svante Ersson: *Culture and Politics. A Comparative Approach*
Aldershot 2002: Ashgate, 353 pp.

The idea that part of what can be observed and sometimes measured in society is the effect of culture and that this cannot be reduced to any other factor easier to operationalise, such as institutions or structures, has gained large support in the social sciences in past decades. Few of the studies belonging to the 'culturalist' tradition in recent social science research have attempted such an ambitious undertaking as that of Jan-Erik Lane and Svante Ersson in their book *Culture and Politics*. In less than 400 pages, the authors formulate and test hypotheses about the cultural conditioning of social and political phenomena, or what they call 'outcomes', in a fairly broad range of diverse areas. Their main thesis is that cultures, or the variations among them, explain part of the variation in the political, social and economic outcomes that are observed and measured across countries, while the other, and sometimes even major, part of it is explained by external contextual factors. The authors modify this 'cultural thesis' into the formula 'Cultural Item X matters for Outcome Y', which calls for a clear specification of which cultural items might matter for which social outcomes.