

Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach, Martha C. Nussbaum
(New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 334 pp., \$24.95 cloth.

Described by the *New York Times* as "America's most prominent woman philosopher," Martha Nussbaum grounds her work in a liberal political tradition that emphasizes the equal worth of all individuals, regardless of their sex, sexual orientation, race, or class. In 1986 Nussbaum was invited by Nobel laureate Amartya Sen to work at the United Nations World Institute for Development Economics Research (WIDER). *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* is the product of Nussbaum's eight-year association with WIDER.

The central problem Nussbaum confronts in this book is the strong correlation between gender inequality and poverty. "When poverty combines with gender inequality," she writes, "the result is acute failure of central human capabilities" (p. 3). This denial of basic human needs and basic rights is "frequently caused by their being women" (p. 4). Nussbaum argues that "international political and economic thought should be feminist, attentive (among other things) to the special problems women face because of sex . . . problems without an understanding of which general issues of poverty and development cannot be well confronted" (p. 4).

Nussbaum develops and applies Amartya Sen's widely respected "capabilities approach" as a vehicle for overcoming the oppression and exploitation of women. The capabilities approach to the evaluation of human societies is that they should be judged in terms of how well their members are able to achieve basic universal goods—sound health, adequate education, greater longevity, and so on. She argues, along with Sen, that development should mean more than merely industrialization and GDP growth, or the mere satisfaction of individuals' preferences, because a narrow focus on economic growth alone has not helped much to increase the basic capabilities of millions of women in the developing world.

"Development," Sen writes in *Development as Freedom*, "requires the removal of major sources of unfreedom: poverty as well as tyranny, poor economic opportunities as well as systematic social deprivation, neglect of public facilities as well as intolerance or overactivity of repressive states." Women's capabilities are severely diminished if they are chronically ill and ignorant. The practical policy implications of Sen's thesis are radical and offer a direction to foreign-aid agencies and international organizations that promote economic development. Development plans must minimally include the following measures: substantial investments in public health, substantial investments in primary and secondary schooling, the enactment and enforcement of laws to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women, and

the end of all forms of authoritarianism, with open public discussion of all governmental decisions.

What does Nussbaum add to Sen's capabilities approach? Nussbaum goes beyond this framework, developing a "threshold level of capabilities" as "a basis for central constitutional principles that citizens have a right to demand from their governments" (p. 12). This partial theory of just distribution is not found in Sen's work. Nor has Sen attempted to ground the capabilities approach in the Marxian/Aristotelian idea of truly human functioning that plays a central role in Nussbaum's argument. Thus the philosophical underpinnings of her discussion on the worth and dignity of the individual human being do not rely on Sen, but on a liberal political tradition that embraces the full development and realization of human potentiality.

Nussbaum notes that her formulation of "Central Human Functional Capabilities" marks the most significant difference between her approach and Sen's: Sen never made such a list. This list of capabilities includes ten broad areas: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination, and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; and control over one's political and material environment. Nussbaum's goal is to determine a "decent social minimum" in these areas. Contending that "the structure of social and political institutions should be chosen, at least in part, with a view to promoting at least a threshold level of these human capabilities" (p. 75), she argues for according each of these areas equal value. The minimum threshold is central to her argument because these basic universal claims trump claims based on culture, family, and religion.

Nussbaum elaborates her liberal feminist theory of the capabilities approach with chapters on cultural relativism, adaptive preferences, religion, and love and family. She focuses on the individual woman who—despite constitutional guarantees of equal rights—confronts economic, religious, and familial arrangements that restrict her capabilities. It is each individual woman's capabilities, she emphasizes, that must be defended from cultural patriarchy, economic discrimination, and family (often a husband's) interference.

For example, toward the end of her book, Nussbaum applies the capabilities approach to two key debates in feminist development policy in India. Indian women are divided over the basic goals of feminism; for some the essence of feminism is a critique of sexual domination, while for others it is a critique of women's economic dependency. Nussbaum shows how domination and dependency are both related to the denial of basic capabilities. She begins with the idea that both employment-related capabilities and sex-related capabilities are fundamental human capabilities that actually complement one another. "Women who wish to avoid sexual brutality or

exploitation in marriage, and to pursue sexual autonomy, can do so far more easily if they are in a strong bargaining position; and access to employment, credit, and land rights are important sources of strength for their bargaining position" (p. 293). She effectively demonstrates that "neither capability should be subordinated to the other, and that public action on both fronts is a legitimate way to promote both sexual and economic freedom" (p. 294). The minimum threshold level of basic capabilities should not be abridged in either of these areas. There is no need for feminists to be talking at cross-purposes on issues like employment and marriage.

Throughout the book, she weaves personal case histories of poor women in India into her argument to dramatize the challenge of introducing global feminist standards in entrenched patriarchal societies. Feminism in India runs up against long-standing cultural practices and religious beliefs. Those who "challenge entrenched satisfactions are frequently charged with being totalitarian and antidemocratic for just this way of proceeding. Who are they to tell real women what is good for them, or to march into an area shaped by tradition and custom with universal standards of what one should demand and what one should desire?" (p. 114). Yet preferences can be manipulated by tradition and intimidation. In her chapter "Adaptive Preferences and Women's Options," Nussbaum shows the way "entrenched preferences can clash with universal norms even at the level of basic nutrition and health" (p. 113). In one desert area in India, women had no feelings of anger or protest about their own severe malnourishment or the lack of a reliable clean water supply: "They knew no other way. They did not consider their conditions unhealthy or unsanitary, and they did not consider themselves to be malnourished" (p. 113). How does a feminist get outside of this box?

A consciousness-raising program changed the situation by challenging entrenched preferences. These same women now fight for clean water, electricity, and a health visitor—enhancing their basic capabilities. The power of this story lies in the interface between universal norms and local culture. Despite poverty and suffering, these women seemed to prefer their traditional way of life. Yet, Nussbaum argues, this local preference should not be respected until these women have been given other options. The capabilities approach demands that a woman have a real opportunity to surmount economic deprivations and low expectations. Nussbaum believes that, if given the choice, women in India will shift their preferences to universal goods—rather than cling to those preferences that were mere reflections of women's restricted situations.

Nussbaum is adept at exploring the difficulties of implementing universalist feminist theories of women's rights. Her capabilities approach does not look to a woman's personal preferences alone. Rather it is the failure of a person to have various

basic human capabilities that is important in itself, and not just because the person minds it or complains about it. Nussbaum is at her strongest when she shows how the capabilities account deals with the problems that plague preference-based approaches (that is, the privileging of choices based on tradition or culture).

I do have a concern, however, with the way Nussbaum has developed her thesis. In many respects, her chart of "Central Human Functional Capabilities" is redundant when compared to existing women's human rights claims. The corpus of international human rights law articulates the economic, social, cultural, political, and civil rights claims to which all individuals are entitled. Now Nussbaum has come up with a new "list of central capabilities that can be used to establish a basic social threshold that should be met for all people." It is not clear, however, how this new list enhances the existing list of women's human rights claims clearly articulated in international law. It has taken decades of struggle for the international women's movement to achieve clarity and unity around these basic human rights for women. Nussbaum could link her work to these efforts more directly.

Moreover, Nussbaum too often presents the capabilities approach as an alternative to the well-established framework of human rights. She painstakingly details how this approach is supposedly superior to a human rights focus. It does not carry the "baggage" of "rights" language, which is understood in many different ways and is often seen as privileging Western culture. Further, she argues that people differ about both the basis of a rights claim (for example, rationality, artifacts of law, or mere life) and whether rights are held by individuals or by groups. Her solution is to propose that the best way of thinking about rights is to see them as "combined capabilities." Yet, in the end, she agrees that we still need the language of rights "despite its unsatisfactory features" (p. 100). She acknowledges the power of a human rights claim to a certain type of treatment. I found this discussion confusing and unhelpful.

Women and Human Development is a vigorous and valuable application of the capabilities approach to issues of gender justice. The capabilities approach gives us tools to analyze what is preventing women from realizing basic rights like security, subsistence, and freedom—the "freedom to achieve adequate functioning" (to use Sen's phrase)—and to direct public policy (in education, health care, and so on). By promoting human capabilities we expand the real freedoms that people enjoy and create an environment in which human rights can be realized. Nussbaum helps us see the strength and utility of this approach.

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