

Capabilities Un-Enabling?

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Abstract: The essay intends to focus the theme of personal capabilities in the age of individual risks and crisis, underlining possible drifts and “side effects”. Musil is certainly the best interpreter of this perspective by defining the modern man as “the man of opportunities”. Related to this, the enabling opportunities themselves may lead to side effects consisting of saturating educational and life environments, thus producing mediocre, low rank and regressive effects. For this reasons we believe that promoting a situation centered “capabilities enabling approach” shouldn’t aim at suggesting praxis and/or specific solutions, whereas it would be more suitable to define an accurate and relevant analysis of material, axiological and cultural systemic variables that can make life conditions, educational environments, concrete and symbolic situations able of being un-enabling.

Key words: capabilities, education, self development, critical thinking

1. Introduction

The perspective wherein the present essay is located, aims at connecting the issue of human capabilities with an historical and material dimension.

Since we are aware of the heuristic strength — in addition to a planning and an emancipative one — related to a theory of enabling knowledges and proficiencies, it is necessary to underline possible drifts that this theoretical construct has lately been dangerously diverted to.

A drift that has taken over upon a social and economical background inspired by economical principles, and that expands its boundary line all the way to the educational fields of any grade, heavily weighting on secondary and tertiary schools’ educative models.

Specifically it is about proposing few “marginal notes” related to the term capability, useful in reactivating the pedagogical reflectiveness, that has lately been weakened by an indiscriminate interpretive, rhetorical, axiological and operative employment. Just about as if it was an educational *conditio sine qua non* independent from a need of critical/theoretical reflectiveness to keep its specific ethical/emancipative profile high.

We believe that it is possible to track down, within this rhetoric, the same simplifying process as described by Eulau — in 1971 — in the matter of relevance, where he glimpsed, connected to the “need-rush”, a denial of what is supposed to be a high-level training having the hallmark of critical imprint, problem solving and personal-capabilities-optimization oriented, in order to reach efficacious and efficient outcomes into complex life environments. So, when capability is not intended in its own highest meaning, it would risk to be gathered to a simplified explanation and comprehension of extremely complex processes. Therefore, capability is intended such

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as a tool for reducing the complexity of educational issues, on the basis of a more practical operation in search for immediate solutions. And it finds its reason why in high levels of social and cultural alert “because these matters are urgent, they require immediate solutions; immediate solutions do not permit complicated analysis; complicated analysis is only a pretense for doing nothing” (Eulau, 1972, p. 59).

2. Is the Capability an “Educational Issue”?

The “educational issue” of the capability thus unveils itself whenever it is employed as an answer of immediate —and unreflective — efficacy.

For what is its nature, the capability can be defined in the answer it is able to give to specific performative requests that, nowadays, are deeply rooted in a relationship between human being and world that puts in the first place values such as employability, economic/productive expendability, social status. These above-mentioned functionings are supposed to arise from men and women’s reflective activity, but they seem to be clearly pre-determined and standardized, on the basis of human reductive representations.

It often appears that the “theory of capabilities” has been exposed to a vulgata that has exempted its interpreters from a critical analysis that presumes dialectical openness towards cultural positions which is better not to take for granted, nor outdated. Consequently forgetting Nussbaum’s opened perspectives, who introduced environmental, cultural, social and personal variables related to blended capabilities. Indeed, such interpreters of the theory of capabilities keep this theoretical construct away from any technical/operative misrepresentation, for the protection of dimensions such as responsibility, choice and problematic nature.

The didactic adaptation of the “capability issue” is sometimes focused onto a proficiencies-based approach related to productive and professional profiles, that often forget human complexity and the complexity of proficiency itself — and its related heuristic creativity, as well (Margiotta, 2009; Alessandrini, 2014, 2005). Users profiles who are asked to have performative skills related to productive, social, professional — and often cultural, as well — relationships practice, which have rarely showed themselves as compatible with individual’s specific subjectivity. The historical and material background of personal experiences can be allocated into a social/cultural/productive perspective mostly by specific “technical and mechanical” filters, such as educational qualification, professional profile, curricula vitae and any certification for “proficiencies assessment”. Other kinds of personal expressions, capabilities and functionings are denied because considered un-functional and/or incompatible.

Therefore, the “low-level theory” and rhetoric of a capability model often forgets the human development approach principles — characterizing Nussbaum’s studies — and misinterprets the concept of capabilities itself, on the basis of models linked to the contemporary — economicistic — vision that only considers the profitable and culturally functional sides of person.

All this risks to threaten the complexity of the subject, who is thus restricted, forced to internalize such partial identity upon tempting promises of increasing the chances to join a world that seems to be the only existing one and to product a specific kind of asset. Such process, and its own surplus of promised worth, ends up to strengthen the adaptation of human potential to a functional dimension only.

Within such productivistic mechanism, the “theory of capabilities” may take a chance of being reduced to a mere functionality, ending up paradoxically stuck into a model which it has tried, in first person, to critically and constructively overcome. Here, personal time gets totally oppressed by the imposition of frenzy educational and

working procedures, stealing precious moments to the reflection and the critic upon “good life conditions” (Dato, 2015). This makes possible the building of a personal identity shaped within a social/cultural environment which doesn’t recognize any other different human profiles than operative/consumerist ones.

As Merlini (2009) opportunely stated, the contemporary context is characterized by an obvious imbalance between power of tools and lack of meaning, deriving from the “operative and productivist saturation of the world” and, according to Jedlowski’s vision, “we have an increasing amount of informations about many different things: but to experience and being informed are not the same thing” (Jedlowski, 1986, p. 99).

These are the main reasons of the importance of tracking down references of functional e de-humanizing reduction, within knowledge’s contents and pedagogical/didactic procedures pre-arranged by institutions. Despite the great progress that pedagogy has made in codifying its own strategies and procedures, what is mentioned above becomes necessary when it misses a likewise systematic reflection upon those theoretical, epistemological and teleological having the task of balancing “the power of the tool” (Mariani, 2008; Cappa, 2009; Butin, 2006). This case is about, paraphrasing Sen, determining the existence of tools that somehow limit individual’s freedom and the related emancipative process/dimension.

Subsequently to this consideration, we are reminded of the priority of the ends upon the means, in other words, it is said to consider the processing of life projects as a higher level of priority than what is at its base and that can be enabling for its fulfillment.

Being able to dream, to wish, to make plans — I preserve reticence about “to hope” — are all essential activities in order to give then authentic meaning to the term capability — as specified by early interpreters of such theory. Differently, if we consider the idea of human beings and citizens as put in the hands of a super-ordinate system beyond the individual, then each knowledge — that claims to bring autonomy — in every enabling learning is translated into a reduction of the individual to a small man, as Mill (2014) stated in his *Essay on Liberty*.

For these reasons it is necessary to keep in mind that the “theory of capabilities” is strictly related to the “theory of proficiencies”. This last one, in its turn, is closely linked to productivity and competitiveness issues — rhetorics and distortions. The chain capability-proficiency-competitiveness is assimilated by a governmental/economical/entrepreneurial that makes attractive those — obvious — cultural and existential degenerations, thus replacing the value/principle of a global human being — in his dimensions of complexity, trans-culture etc. — with a homologated, interchangeable and globalized individual.

Caught into this second globalizing net, the “theory of capabilities” subjugates itself to superficial interpretations that return a reductive representation of the human being, often betrayed in its actual emancipatory potentiality.

This is a pedagogical perspective that doesn’t allow to consider a human dimension — which is complex, connected, open and developmentally emerging (Annacontini, 2008; Morin, 2002), but shows controversial corollaries instead, i.e., subordination of proficiency to technical operations of men and women; promotion of plurilingualism for economic purposes only; celebration of new technologies as communication tools that the more able they are to standardize/sterilize cultural, creative and communicative heritage, the more functional they become.

So, when pedagogy walks through this path, its theoretical and practical integration with a univocal representation of educational model of human dimension, is easily predictable.

By supporting the impoverishment of human potentialities and promoting forms of education on the basis of

the myth of functionality, the axiology of exchange value, the ideal of competitiveness, can be defined — in interior homine — moral interpretations, intelligences and formae mentis that can now happily pursue a systematic repression of personal differences, aiming at forgetting sustainable human heritage and cultural/social/educational alternative paths. And we have nothing to say when enabling educational procedures taking place at school tend to the promotion of expendable professional outcoming profiles into labour market.

However, if this procedure forgets to educate human beings before any producer/consumer, and if such educational procedure doesn't promote a distinctive intelligence but supports a standardized one, then pedagogical and critical issues come along the way (Baldacci, 2014).

3. To think the capabilities over

Thence the reconsideration of the term capability appears to be necessary when it describes an educational model — an enabling approach — toward a technical and standardizing exploitation.

Below rhetorics of universal qualifying capabilities, hides the risk of human involution — in the matter of validation of those commonly considered efficient proficiency, while simultaneously discarding others; or fossilization of the context where they're supposed to be employed — to which, in our opinion, follows the spread of the said vision into the academic field of human sciences.

An “enabling approach” that has imposed itself beyond any critical and reflective reason, owing to its efficient employment as a complexity reducer, à la Eulau.

“Theory of capabilities”, “capabilities approach”, “model of capabilities” etc., are circumlocutions that, most of the times, tend to describe a flat technical exercise of adaptation of few pedagogically low-levelled - not in sé, but per sé — didactic strategies, which find their only lifeline in revoking a wider, nobler and more complex epistemological/philosophical frame of emancipatory pedagogies.

It can be considered as the vulgarization of a set of educational procedures that have gradually renounced to critically confront their own epistemological/philosophical roots, giving birth to a lower level knowledge which is based upon a descriptive analysis of possible results, but misses a critical reflectiveness, indeed.

In parallel, the theories that found a practical validation have renounced to their utopian vocation as well, giving rise to a lower level theorization — a theory in action, because worried only about being appropriate to the hegemonic vision, thus forgetting their revolutionary and innovative capital.

When this theory and praxis downgrade takes place, the “theory of capabilities” — although aware of the importance of Sen and Nussbaum's theories — runs the risk of becoming surface rhetoric, while it has, at its bottom, the purpose to overpass technical/regulative logics of human normalization.

To go over the capabilities, then, would mean to try to reactivate their critical and revolutionary features — historically and materialistically determined, practical before technical, educational before instructive, philosophical before economical, according to what is our opinion.

It becomes more important to underline that the “capability system” is firstly a superstructure — also educative — rooted into contemporaneity. And, because of this, it hasn't any legitimizing value.

The historical features of knowledge that see the birth of capability concept — think about the fragmentation of knowledge, the fall of meta-narrative, the imposition of a complex post-Popper epistemology etc. can indeed be placed at the heart of contemporary ages, and such concept could have hardly imposed itself into a different historical background because of its correlated concepts of efficiency and performativity.

These last aren't, after all, self-legitimated nor legitimizing of any educative procedure, for being in the need of a rationality that would give back meaning and value to them.

In order to clarify the field between our essay advances across, we find necessary to specify:

- that we are specifically interested in correlated capabilities — not basic, nor inner. Within this dimension, the absolute “correlativity” between subject and symbolic/material background is determined. Thence, the concept of capability-in-action can be translated involving a material background that embraces and orientates the chances for individual fulfillment, so creating premises for what Bruscalioni (2009) calls possibilitations;
- we recognize that a possible “variation” of capabilities can somehow occur due to a “fuzzy logic” (Kosko, 2000) that qualifies a context as fertile or corrosive — adopting Nussbaum's terms;
- we believe that historical perspective in which capabilities must be thought is constitutively exposed to overturnings typical of a logic of pharmakon (Curi, 2002) and of a dialectic of implications (Manfredi, 2011).

Considering contemporary historical interference and the just outlined features of the capability type we intend to take as reference point, has pushed us in looking at a typology of human being that seems to be very close to the idea of individual stated by Musil during the XVIII century.

His “man of possibilities” tells a perspective which shows a clear comprehension of the issue of the relationship between subject and world, distinctive of the modern ages, that while providing many reasons, many possible identifications, projects and wishes, it lacerates human beings — the freed ego becomes a multiple-ego, à la Elster (1991), a minimal-ego, à la Lasch (2004) — to the bewilderment, forcing them to overcome the misery grounded in the innovative possibility of being human.

The logic of pharmakon appears to rule these backgrounds, which follow operating models produced not by humans but by anonymous over-individual spheres.

It's no coincidence that modern, post-modern and contemporary contexts, wherein the protagonist is still a subject à la Musil, have often generated wishes of restoration, Jedloski says, of an “essential and constrictive reality”, able to limit tearing cravings.

In this sense, it is symptomatic the description made by Lasch about the reduction of subjectivity. It perfectly suits an age of transformations and performative power such as the present one, and it defines as “rare and prosperous” those traditional anchorings that protect humanity's everyday life.

Lasch humanizes the “rareness of flesh and bones” prophetically theorized by Leary (1994), cleaning this vision from technological optimism and commensurating it to the historical transformations deriving from always difficult crisis and reconstructions, by which “everyday living becomes a survival training”.

A personal story — into a world that enables towards hetero-defined careers, friends — into a world that enables towards competitiveness, a family or belongingness to a place — into a world that enables towards mobility and flexibility — become luxury goods.

And within this background triumphs a human reduction to a minimal-ego, as a strategic defense. An ego needed to confront the expected — but unpredictable — difficulties that men and women will meet — although “enabled” towards meeting the world of productivity, because unprepared to deal with life.

An ego that reduces cultural resistances to the lowest, that intellectually ergonomises itself, integrated with emerging cultural phenomena such as defensive sarcasm, emotional disengagement, unwillingness for long-term relationships and victimism, according to Lasch.

It's not a hard matter for anybody to recognize, within this description, part of the new generations coming out of tertiary educational paths and, most of all, adults with subordinate identities, overshadowed by eighties'

capitalistic brutality, engaged in the labour market.

The said phenomenon leads us to consider the different risks involved in the relationship subject-world, by which the possibility could turn into determination, transformation might get stuck into reproductive stasis, capabilities might be un-enabling, adaptability could be reduced to mere passiveness. Pharmakon, indeed.

It is reflection over a system that, somehow, goes beyond the simple empirical fact — Morin and Bateson's analysis may suggest few examples — and that cannot be efficaciously tackled by imagining to intervene with ad hoc actions but involving, instead, a wider epistemological and gnoseological, existential and axiological implication.

In other words, we believe that any action flattened on solutions that answer to widespread emergency logics and/or innovative trends — and their promises — is absolutely inadequate.

On the contrary, we believe it is necessary to claim back the dignity and the usefulness of a critical and reflective phase meant for subjects and learnings; to take time to epistemologically reflect not upon solutions, but upon ecologies, where dysfunctional phenomena emerge from.

We know, after all, how important is such reflective — formal or not — phase within the educational action and its previous planning, in order to guide an aware — and predictive — analysis of needs and contexts.

In this path we are supported by Postman and Bateson.

Postman, in his *The Disappearance of Childhood* (2005), even though referring to different issues, he places them into a common social and cultural background, underlining that it's not always possible to have the right answer to every question. He indeed admits:

“What must be done? I have no answer to give, and I say this with relief and discouragement. Relief comes from the fact that I am not obliged to teach others how to live their lives [...]. Discouragement obviously comes from the same source [...]. But this thought has come to comfort me: Even if one can't tell how to prevent a social disaster, it can be useful to try at least to understand its causes” (pp. 11s).

On a different note, less existentially worried and more epistemologically centered, Bateson (2011) observes that:

“We are not external to the ecology, for which we formulate plans, we are inevitably part of it [...] so, implicit ideas of our plans matters more than plans themselves and it would be insane to sacrifice these ideas on the altar of pragmatism” (pp. 549–550).

Both visions encourage our reflectiveness to promote an enabling perspective firmly connected to ecological contexts and not only aimed at introducing praxis, strategies or ad hoc solutions.

The current state of things, makes more relevant to outline an accurate and pertinent analysis of the system's variables — material, axiological and cultural, in this case — that make life, educative, material and symbolic environments risky of being un-enabling. And it would be useful to begin from the phenomenology related to them.

By assuming a problematic point of view, it would be possible to outline a description — which renounces to the observation myth — of the boundaries of dialectic/antinomic mutual overturning — not synthetic — of requests, identifying the reasons why it is possible that such dynamics can actually drive the reality to the point of being un-enabling.

Therefore, we are going to examine two macro-areas — knowledge and technic — whose presence into contemporary society is obvious, in order to check whether hypothesis of an historical and material overturning of

capabilities into un-enabling is fiction of not.

3.1 Concerning Knowledge

The “enabling perspective” wherein the knowledge can now be located, is linked to evolutions that, especially during the XVIII century, the education has known, on the basis of influential philosophers and theorists’ studies in pedagogical fields, as well. Think, for example, to Illich, Montessori, Milani, Freire, Dewey, Bertin – some of which are quoted by theorists of capabilities -.

Moreover, should be listed all of those who have promoted the idea of increasing critical awareness and addressing towards progressive emancipation from fears, made possible by accessing new alphabets. All of those who believe that knowledge is rooted in possibilities of pursuing high and difficult purposes of autonomy and individual/community progression.

Public school has represented a great step forward in enriching human’s critical awareness and social engagement development.

The evolution of possibilities for mediation of knowledges, has made available, for the very first time, repertoires of knowledge traditionally belonging to intellectual elite.

A rosy situation that doesn’t occur similarly worldwide, by the way. There still exist significant differences between West and underdeveloped wide areas of Asia, Africa and South America — consult UNESCO, Unicef, Save the Children etc. reports.

The great progress in the spread of culture, however, meets few oppositions — that may even be only procedural, but still undeniable — that seem to make possible the eventuality of overturning the idea of an enabling education. This eventuality may clearly appear when we face the action of building an undifferentiated multitude, where individuals fade into the group, instead of being intentionally aimed at strengthening emancipation.

Tocqueville, in his book *Democracy in America*, had wisely pointed out that the access to cultural resources, would encourage processes of identification with the masses and progressive individualization.

Arendt (1964) stated “the unnatural conformism of a mass society [cannot] impede the destruction of the world and, with it, of many features of human plurality. This can occur [...] within a mass society [...] where everyone behave as members of a single family, in continuity with each other. So, men and women are deprived of the ability to recognize and listen to their neighbors and vice versa” (p. 65).

Very interesting are, also, Ortega y Gasset’s considerations, by which he depicts a subject who believes to know, when it really doesn’t know anything, nor critically reflects. By his *Revolt of the Masses* (1930), we can retrieve an illustration of a human being which can easily correspond with the one deriving from the homogenization of cultures and minds.

According to Ortega y Gasset, the man of the masses is more responsive and intellectually gifted than ever. However these capabilities are flattened by the man himself and, instead of motivating to critical reflectiveness and sense of responsibility, they address to withdraw into oneself. A type of man who feels rewarded by the public acclaim of stereotypes and preconceptions collectively internalized.

The “mass perspective”, depending on different backgrounds and conditions, has given ideas but not reflection, thus producing the overturning of capabilities into un-enabling ones.

We are here at the heart of educational issue: the birth of a subject who is depersonalized — due to the powerful action of new media, as well, a human being who knows but is not able to independently reflect, because

trapped into contexts rich in information but un-enabling indeed.

According to Benjamin's words (1962), this subject is missing an *Erfahrung* — aware and gained experience, thus flattening in the *Erlebnis* — the little experience lived.

It is hard not to ascribe this drift to a specific pedagogical model which, having on purpose the fulfillment of a public and democratic school, has ended to forget the safeguarding of critical reflectiveness, the cure of human extra-intellectual spheres, the enhancement of innovative and creative alphabets and equal educational opportunities guarantee.

3.2 Concerning Technic

The scenario of technology and the celebration of its potentiality as an enabling tool, bring to life few contradictions.

The “enabling perspective” wherein the technology can now be located, stretches its roots in Gehlen's vision of human being, which articulates the idea of a technology useful to give birth to the exoneration category.

“By missing specialized instincts”, Gehlen (2003) writes, “the human being isn't naturally fitted for any specific habitat and, consequently, it has the only ability to transform — thanks to its intelligence — any natural pre-condition. Lack of sensorial proficiencies, lack of weapons, nude, with embryonic habits and unaware of its instincts, the subject existence strictly depends on action” (p. 32).

Technology, moving through integration, intensification and facilitation, orientates individual actions — separated from instincts — in a world where human beings take control among other forms of life, because projected toward the future.

Such “enabling vision” of technic is anchored to a deeper anthropological transformation, depicted by the before-mentioned Leary.

His optimistic scenario of integration between humans and technologies is grounded in a cyber culture that promotes neo-humanistic and optimistic visions of science and technic.

Thence, technic becomes an attempt for human being's amplification, by promising to launch a progressive and incessant enhancement of human's adaptive and transformative abilities and capabilities within artificial life environments.

Moreover, by practically functionalizing scientific knowledges and research fields, technical translation of knowledges tends to become the unit of measure of intellectual activities of men and women.

According to this perspectives, technic's potentiality of expanding capability's dimension is evident because, the principles of adaptation and operative/material mutual transformation subject-world are, at least, included within it.

Nevertheless, on the basis of the just-said material transformation, we reach the overturning point that makes capabilities un-enabling.

Galimberti (2009) has efficaciously summarized the risks of this phase:

To replace the making – the action – with the doing – the implementation;

To promote the training of an only calculative and convergent thinking;

To make calculative thinking absolute and, thence, flatten and gradually anesthetize human emotions such as pain, fear, love, joy.

Technical mediation has become a widespread relational and communicative habit, which is gradually dictating its own codes, logics and evaluation scales of the relationship subject-world.

The worst case would mean to risk the reflective action, thanks to which is possible to discover and comprehend one's problem solving proficiencies, as well as their capitalizing. Then, the first risk, would be the individual reduction to a "technical systems executive", within life and labour environments often unable to reflect over themselves and re-design their realities.

The second risk is related to the divergent and creative thinking, which is a powerful tool for emancipation, where creativity corresponds with the creation of alternative worlds and new solutions.

The third and last supposed risk concerns the importance of empathy that according to Nussbaum — is one of those cognitive variables essential to make possible a fruitful meeting between capabilities and — material and personal-contexts.

4. Temporary Conclusions

As said, this essay doesn't propose solutions, nor operative procedures. It rather intend to share few considerations about the fundamental and obvious importance of recovering the reflectiveness as a transcendental tool aimed at preventing capabilities' degeneration. Especially nowadays, when capabilities — enabling perspectives, capability approach etc. — have pervasively invaded pedagogical alphabets and planning.

Such way of thinking unveils itself to be the main mediator in the relationship subject-world which is the essential relationship of a productive and emancipative "theory of capabilities" related to combined abilities where is important the care for personal/social chances of being and becoming.

In this sense, we must recognize the context as an ensemble of environmental variables directly substantial for the individual, and as an ensemble of social variables, wherein the subject is and acts. So, the context, can be considered as a dynamic scenario which is located, recognized and re-defined of and by human beings.

Reflectiveness then becomes space and time of critical awareness, a tool for reading and confronting reality, to activate alternative ways of interpreting the relationship subject-world, that allows to reach emancipation, progress and perpetual – utopic – re-definition of functionings and related – historical/contextual – capabilities identification. Thus, reducing pharmakon-related side effects to the lowest.

We then firmly believe that a reflective and critical education is today needed, in order to develop and integrate:

- individual's potentiality of independent symbolic representation;
- cultural and social requests that operate within symbolic contexts.

Through this path it is possible to guarantee the own existential and life planning prerogatives to the subject, thus allowing the definition of one's own purposes within the enabling context, by encouraging an auto-ego-coordinating thinking.

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