

Social Services, Democracy and the Capability Approach: Concluding Reflections

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The turn toward welfare service states puts the issue of democracy at the very core of social policies. Arne Wohlfarth's introduction to this special issue convincingly presented the challenges raised by the recent evolutions of the welfare state. On the one hand, the emergence of the social investment discourse suggests a very specific view of human development, which focuses on human capital development as the most efficient and relevant way to tackle disadvantage. Under such circumstances, a precise notion of well-being and agency is imposed on beneficiaries, which is purported to be the necessary result from the present economic and social circumstances. There is claimed to be no alternative which disqualifies any notion of political and democratic action in the field of social policies: adaptation is an unquestionable necessity. By contrast, we contend social investment ought not to be conceived as a way to adapt individuals to the needs of a competitive economy; rather, it is necessary to democratize social investment and this certainly passes through a collective discussion on its ends rather than focusing on the most efficient means to get the highest financial returns, e.g. by inviting private actors, who are supposedly more efficient, to deliver social policies and social services (cf. social impact bonds). Rather than advocating the reform of social policies and turning them into tools that bring the highest financial returns, thus reducing the issue of social investment to that of finding the most efficient means to reach competitive-friendly social policies, we claim that the most pressing question is "Social investment for what?": what is or should be the purpose of social investment policies? Into what should be invested: into employability – hence considering human beings as means towards the end of economic competitiveness and economic growth – or into capability, suggesting that investment should not seek higher financial returns, but to enhance people's capabilities and freedoms to lead a life they have reason to value? The answers to such questions make a huge difference. They should not be left to experts or technocrats of the public administration, but lead to an encompassing public debate where all viewpoints of all stakeholders ought to be expressed.

This also requires a change of perspective on the labour market and its modes of operation. They have to be regarded as being within the reach of political action so that adaptation to its requirements is no longer considered to be an inescapable necessity and beneficiaries of social policies will not be pushed to adapt constantly throughout their life. We contend that markets are social constructions and that recognizing them as such is a prerequisite for designing meaningful social investment policies, i.e. social investment that people have reason to value. In order to properly (re-)politicize social investment policies, there is a need to politicize the labour market and its modes of operation. Failing this, the supply-side fundamentalism, which inspires to a large extent contemporary social policy at EU and national level, will appear as a kind of fatality: nothing can be done against market forces, so the only possibility is to equip

people and adapt them to the market requirements. Once more, there is no alternative; it would then be incongruous to ask the question “the labour market for what?”. In order to move beyond social policies that are subordinated to the labour market’s needs, demand-side policies should be rehabilitated, together with the vision of markets as social constructions that can be shaped by political action. In short, social investment and the labour market should be considered as undecided issues that need democratic and public debate to be settled and cannot be solved via a simple cost-benefit calculus. We need to move beyond market citizenship – where the creation of efficient producers is considered to be the role of social policies, as well as to enable their contribution to economic competitiveness - and rehabilitate democratic citizenship, where not only means but also ends (of social investment policies, of the labour market and of the whole polity) should be discussed.

On the other hand, welfare service states go hand in hand with the individualization and personalization of social policies. Thus, they are moving beyond cash-based welfare states and their standardized modes of redistribution towards personalised services aiming at empowering individuals. Combined with undemocratic social investment policies, seeking the highest financial returns, this mainly boils down to increasing people’s employability. Together with an undemocratic labour market, which is considered as something that cannot be shaped or regulated but should be adapted to, this implies mostly a focus on supply-side policies and individual responsibility as well as a postulated powerlessness in terms of demand-side interventions and social/collective responsibility. Under such circumstances, social policies and social services are at the risk of being turned into tools for fostering market citizenship rather than full citizens with real freedom to lead a life they have reason to value. The worst case scenario is certainly a managerial state, which strives to enforce these aims on its civil servants who are then pushed to act as driving belts of these objectives (translated as performance indicators or quantitative targets), and of civil servants who use their discretionary power to patronize and discipline beneficiaries into becoming good market citizens. Such a scenario postulates that becoming a good market citizen, i.e. acquiring competencies, know-how and behaviour that fits the needs of the labour market and of economic competitiveness, equates to allowing all beneficiaries to lead a life they have reason to value. Enhancing employability seems to coincide then, with human development for all beneficiaries; it is postulated that such interventions, even when they are implemented under the threat of sanctions, are appropriate and that efficient social services should be reformed in this manner.

Actual practices within social services are – fortunately, one could say - often quite distant from this dystopian way of interpreting social investment and social services. Street-level bureaucrats use their discretionary power in directions that are not the ones anticipated or advocated by high civil servants. Very often, such discretion is interpreted as lacking efficiency and legitimacy: managerial devices are not able to supervise bureaucrats’ behaviour and ought to be reformed in order to increase their efficiency in such a direction; street-level bureaucrats have not been elected, they therefore ought to be constrained to compliance with administrative directives and official performance indicators and targets. The matter then boils down to finding more efficient managerial tools in order to curb the illegitimate behaviours of SLBs, whose professional expertise needs to be tamed into compliance with policy targets. In such cases, democracy is envisaged as a prerogative of policy-makers and high civil servants, and it is assumed that the viewpoints of beneficiaries and street-level bureaucrats should be forced into compliance with the official notions of what a good social policy or an appropriate life conduct is. Here too, an enlarged vision of democracy is needed,

one that is in line with the perspective of capability for voice, which requires that all people are allowed to express their viewpoints, desires, aspirations, and make them count in a collective decision-making process. More specifically, street-level bureaucrats should not be compelled to implement a specific conception of social investment policies and social services on all their beneficiaries; and, even more important, beneficiaries should not be constrained to abide by notions of social investment or social services endorsed by high civil servants or by street-level bureaucrats themselves. When they are devised in a standardized and constraining way, social investment and market-friendly social policies may be disrespectful to beneficiaries and impose on them solutions that they may assess as inappropriate; capability-friendly policies, by contrast, require that beneficiaries' voices are listened to carefully and taken seriously. This does not imply that their viewpoint will prevail in the end, but that it is given due weight when the actual content of social investment and social services is designed for each and every individual beneficiary. Top-down solutions or quick-fix recipes are not adequate in this regard, as they do not pay attention to individual circumstances, skills and aspirations. Within the perspective inspired by capability for voice, democracy does not stop at the door of parliaments. It needs to pervade public administration processes and welfare service states, so that designed interventions and solutions take due account of individuals' needs, skills and aspirations as voices of beneficiaries themselves.

We are well aware that the semantics of capabilities might well be dovetailed with the current agenda of welfare and social service reforms. Protagonists of these reforms tend to highlight the potentially capacitating, future-orientated rationalities of social servicing. The metric of capabilities highlighting beneficiary's freedom to act seems attractive in order to provide a normative sound alternative to the compensating, redistributive rationalities of a transfer-oriented welfare architecture. While we propose and defend a capabilities perspective on social and social service policy we acknowledge the dangers associated with a view that highlights the issue of 'internal capabilities' possessed by individuals instead of a systematic analysis of the implications of institutions, social relations, structural (power) inequalities or conditions of labour. Bearing in mind both, the tendency of social policies to be cloaked in rhetoric of freedom and justice and the great gap between the legitimated egalitarian and democratic ideals against the reality of social policies – in developing as well as in advanced capitalist societies – the capabilities perspective we suggest is closely related to an egalitarian notion of deepening democracy. It is not intended to provide a philosophically decent legitimation but to provide an approach allowing the assessment of the way a service-oriented welfare architecture might – or may not – keep its promise of providing a richer social baseline in terms of enabling (future) citizens to pursue more satisfying and more flourishing lives.

We suggest that critical social science and critical public policy analyses necessarily include a normative political stand that appeals to the values of dignity, autonomy and the basic requirements of human flourishing that deliver the foundation for the critique that social policy perpetuates eliminable forms of injustice. Thus, a critical social science has to be necessarily engaged in conceptualizing and identifying avoidable suffering and feasible forms of well-being or flourishing, and therefore to substantiate a compelling justification for what should reasonably count as (politically relevant) suffering and thriving. We suggest that in order to do so, there is little alternative but to appeal to a normative metric which corresponds to a version of the Capabilities Approach. This is committed to the aim of social and political justice, highlighting that all citizens should have genuine and broadly equal access to the material and social means necessary to live flourishing lives while also underscoring that

people should at the same time be equally empowered to contribute to the collective control of the conditions and decisions which affect their common fate. This entails the assurance of equal opportunities for everybody to take an active role in shaping public policy, for which people have to be equipped with resources adequate to having a genuine capability to mount an effective defence of their (political) views and turn them into a relevant part of the public political discourse. This capabilities perspective is about broadening and sustaining the informational basis for a participative rather than about formulating a technocratic agenda on optimizing allegedly social and economically useful potentials and capacities of individuals.

In our view, democracy within welfare agencies, i.e. the democratization of the relationship between public administration and its users and beneficiaries, is certainly needed, but if it is meant to result into beneficiaries' capability enhancement, it needs to be complemented by the/a democratization of the market and of social investment policies. As a matter of fact, the beneficiaries' aspirations cannot be taken seriously if social investment policies are envisaged as a necessary adaptation to the requirements of the labour market and of economic competitiveness; if the people's freedoms to lead a life they have reason to value are to be enhanced, this requires not only taking their voices within welfare agencies and social services more seriously, it also requires the shaping of policies and markets in a way that they open up opportunities to lead a life that can be cherished. It therefore implies that markets and policies should be considered as social constructions, where all citizens are allowed to have their say.

This wide-ranging democratization process – of markets, of social investment policies, of social services – in turn implies the reduction of economic inequalities, thus underscoring the complementarity between the redistributive welfare state and personalized social services. Indeed, economic poverty often goes hand in hand with political poverty and enhancing capability for voice and democracy requires reducing economic inequalities. As such, market regulation and redistribution policies are to be envisaged as conditions of an effective democracy and of the renewal of genuine citizenship rights beyond market citizenship.

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