THE CAPABILITY APPROACH TO WORK
The Uses and Limitations of a Political Economy on Sociological Soil
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The Capability Approach to Work
The Uses and Limitations of a Political Economy on Sociological Soil

Samuel JULHE

Abstract. Stemming from the work of Amartya Sen, “the capability approach” is today widely disseminated and used internationally in the field of the social sciences, inspiring several hundred contributions. However, aside from a few well-known authors, French sociology seems quite disinterested in the potential contributions of the Senian oeuvre. Based on a methodically constructed corpus of academic texts, this article seeks to put the epistemological and empirical significance of this research programme into perspective. Following a presentation of the conceptual apparatus produced by Sen, along with the comments and controversies that it raises either from an epistemological or methodological point of view, I observe the way in which researchers in the social sciences apply the capability approach to the subjects of work and employment, subjects that for this approach are one of the entry points to the French intellectual world. The ways in which authors attempt, more or less successfully, to overcome or circumvent some of the approach’s limitations and above all to operationalize it for empirical research ends, are examined. Three fundamental points, touching on notions of counterfactual reasoning, agency, and conversion are specifically discussed since they could well deepen sociological inquiry into the worlds of work. Through this analysis of the Senian approach, the conditions for the reception and use by sociologists of the political philosophical work of an economist are called into question.

Keywords. Work—employment—Capability approach—Amartya Sen—Sociology of sociology

In Stockholm on 14th October 1998, the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences awarded the Bank of Sweden prize to Amartya Sen. Since then, the work of the person who would sometimes be called “the Nobel of the poor” has had extensive influence in many areas of the human and social sciences: economics of course, but also philosophy, social geography, law, educational studies, anthropology and sociology. The topics covered by Sen, as well as by his collaborators and epigones are numerous, while remaining linked to the analysis of economic development, poverty (Sen 1981), famine (Sen 1981; Sen and Drèze 1989), disability (Sen 1992), gender inequalities (Sen 1987a, 1993), but also employment (Sen, 1997). The academic literature provides several hundred contributions to the exegesis or criticism of the “capability approach,” as well as a series of empirical works referring to this conceptual apparatus. In spite of this, the heuristic interest of this approach is still rarely discussed within the Francophone community of sociologists, unlike in the

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English-speaking world (Orton, 2011; Whiteside and Mah 2012; Kremakova; 2013; Holmwood 2013). Based on the analysis of a methodically constructed corpus of academic writings, this article aims to put the epistemological and empirical relevance of this research programme into perspective. Through this analysis of the Senist approach “at work,” it is how an economist’s works of political philosophy have been received and made use of by sociologists that is in question, the relations between economics and sociology being often complex and controversial (Baudelot and Mairesse 2005; Steiner 2008; Steiner and Vatin 2009).

The research questions for which the capability approach is presented as a relevant analytical framework are numerous and varied, so that focusing on a relatively circumscribed topic seemed necessary in order to allow comparisons and connections between studies. The choice was made to focus more directly on the field of work and employment, which has been relatively well covered by Francophone researchers using the capability approach, taking into account the diffusion of the Senian approach within the French intellectual context. (See Box 2). Indeed, while the application of the capability approach to work and employment remains limited at a general level and by comparison with other fields of research (eg poverty, education), it also appears that 17% of the articles using the capability approach by authors publishing in French are concerned with this field as against 7% in the case of articles written in English or other languages. The area of work and employment thus seems to constitute a starting point which is at the same time both relatively well defined and relevant to the French sociological community from which to present

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**Box 1.—** Methodology

This article is based on the analysis of a corpus that is representative of academic publications dealing with the capability approach or using the concepts derived from it. The initial corpus (n = 1,093) was compiled by collecting the results from six bibliographic databases.

— A set of references was collected from Scopus, published by Elsevier, and advertised as being one of the most extensive bibliographic databases in the scientific field worldwide, covering more than 21,000 titles of peer-reviewed journals, including 23% (4,830) in the social sciences.

— This set was supplemented by SocIndex and EconLit, published by EBSCO, which respectively list publications in the field of sociology (820 indexed journals) and economics (600 indexed journals).

— Finally, in order to take maximum account of French-language publications, the databases of the portals Cairn, Persée and Érudit were also explored.

As a result of the fact that simply searching “Amartya Sen” or “A. Sen” leads to more than 50,000 documents, it was necessary to make the search more specific in order to establish a relevant corpus. Each of the databases used has been subjected to a similar request to obtain documents whose summary or title contains the words “capability” or “capabilities” or “capacity” or “capacities,” AND whose set of fields contained at least one reference to “Amartya Sen” or “A. Sen.” The de-duplication of the results produced a list of 1,093 bibliographic records, and the thematic analysis of their titles, abstracts and keywords makes it possible to distinguish 340 documents (31.1% of the total) that included discussions of “capabilities” or the “capability approach” (27.2%), the “education system” (14.0%), “Public policy” (11.2%), “gender” (10.9%), “health” (7.1%), and relationships with the “environment” (6.0%). Finally, 84 references (7.7% of the total) deal specifically with an application to the field of work or employment, which is the thematic focus of this article (references whose bibliography is presented in Appendix 2).
Box 2.—**Dissemination of the capability approach in France and specificity of the topic of “work and employment”**

While following the usual vectors of the circulation of scientific and intellectual ideas – i.e. translation of texts, researcher mobility, meetings at academic events, collaborations around research projects (Gingras 2002; Martin et al. 2004) the mode of diffusion of Senian work differs from that experienced during the major periods of import and translation of foreign works by French sociologists from the 1950s to the 1970s (Chenu 2001; Marcel 2004; Martin et al. 2004). Although his writings had been widely reviewed and explored in English-language academic journals from the 1980s (Sugden 1986, 1993; Cohen 1990; Roemer 1994, 1996), until the end of the 1990s their diffusion to French specialists was mainly confined to those working in the economics of development (Dubois and Mahieu 2009: 246) and did not pass through the major institutions of academic legitimation such as the Sorbonne, EHESS, ENS, or CNAM. Although several early articles,1 were translated and published in the French magazine *Esprit*, which is sometimes considered to be one of the places where the “social philosophy of the ruling class” (Hauchecorne 2010: 67) is developed, it was mainly the publicity around the award to him of the Nobel Prize in 1998, followed by the publication by La Découverte the following year of the French translation of a number of Sen’s essays as *L’Économie est une science morale* which led the French intellectual community to pay closer attention to the work of the Indian author. However, the first attempts to use his work in France, presented as a “renewal of social criticism” and deliberately aimed at the “general public” by its publishers (Maric 2001: 149; Hauchecorne 2009:110) received much more attention from those in the administrative and political spheres than it did from academics. Indeed, since the 1990s, Sen’s work has been very favourably received by international organizations such as the United Nations Development Program2 and the World Bank,3 but also by the International Labor Office4 (Maric 2001: 194; Bénicourt 2006; Farvaque 2006: 167). Similarly, in France, the 2006 general seminar of one of the government’s advisory consultancies was concerned with the “social policy implications of theories of justice,” with the “official objective of assessing the relevance of the theory of capabilities to the analysis of social policies” (Hauchecorne 2010: 68–71). This type of use of and attention to his ideas, added to the meeting organized in the framework of the “Stiglitz Commission” between the then President of the French Republic, Nicolas Sarkozy, the economist J.-P. Fitoussi and Amartya Sen, contributed without any doubt to ensuring that Sen was classified as being among the group of “governmental intellectuals” (Sapiro 2009) in the eyes of French academic researchers, with the suspicion that his approach was smeared by the taint of being a “quasi-scientific language” (Passeron 1991) and this at least partially curbed the use of his approach in social science research, and more particularly in sociology, a discipline which in France has often shown itself to be distinctly hostile towards any blurring of the boundaries between “research” and “consultancy.”

However, since the early 2000s, several Francophone researchers have been applying Senian concepts. This is the case not only in the field of development economics,5 but also in research in the field of work and employment, with a first series of studies carried out under the aegis of the socio-economist Robert Salais, who is also a leading figure in the

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what the Senian perspective may or may not bring to an empirical approach. In order to develop its argument, this article first revisits the definition of the conceptual apparatus produced by Sen, this re-reading being made in terms of the epistemological tools of the social sciences (Passeron 1991; Berthelot 1998, 2001). It then presents the controversies and debates raised by economists, philosophers, anthropologists and sociologists, with the brunt of criticism directed at both the anthropological conception underlying the Senian approach and the methodological difficulties posed by its operationalization. The third stage of the proposed approach involves specific study of the corpus of texts applying the capability approach to the subjects of work and employment, analysing the ways in which their authors employ the writings of Sen, and try to go beyond or circumvent some of their limitations, but above all attempt to implement their concepts in empirical research. Finally, there is a discussion of the fundamental ways in which the capability approach might reinforce a sociological approach to the worlds of work, as well as how the heuristic potential of the notions of counterfactual reasoning, agency and conversion could be deepened, particularly where they concern the study of career paths.

6. See the research projects From Employability to Capability. An Exploratory Approach on the Quality of Employment (2001–2003); Eurocap : dialogue social, emploi et territoire, pour une politique européenne des capacités (2002–2006); Capright: Resources, Rights and Capabilities: in Search of Social Foundations for Europe (2007–2010). These projects are linked to the network of excellence «Reconciling Work and Welfare in Europe» (RECWOWE), supported by the European Commission between 2006 and 2011. This network has also supported the work of B. Hobson (Sweden), using the capability approach to address the work–life balance.

Semantic space of an intentionalist and action-based approach

Before any discussion of the scope of the approach, a clarification of its “semantic space” (Passeron 1991: 618) and its “framework of relevance” (Berthelot 2001: 223) is necessary. Indeed, “in many respects a social scientist may feel on familiar ground in dealing with the central concepts of the capability-based approach while at the same time being disoriented or even embarrassed by its vocabulary and modes of reasoning” (Munck and Zimmermann 2008: 12). To synthesize the conceptual apparatus established by Sen can be difficult, perhaps less because it is a “whole” where “the way in which the different parts interact must be understood to see the importance of its contribution” (Gillardone 2010: 11), than as a result of the evolving mass of a subject constructed and refined over a period of forty years and twenty books. Several attempts at marking out the “Senian lexicon” already exist (Bertin 2003; Dubois and Mahieu 2009), as well as some overviews of the chronology of its development (Bonvin and Farvaque 2008; Schor 2009; Saxena 2011) and I will return above all to the conceptual definitions that are directly derived from Sen’s writings before confronting them with the comments and criticisms they have raised. This first part also aims to discuss its anthropological conception, both from an individual and a collective point of view, in order to situate it more precisely among the epistemic poles and schemas delineating the knowledge space of the social sciences (Berthelot 2001: 504).

Sen’s work concentrates on an analysis of inequalities and the definition of principles of justice that can promote what he presents as a renewed form of economic development. His rejection of utilitarianism and his discussion of Kenneth Arrow’s theses initially reflected the refusal to regard individuals as “mere passive carriers of desires” or as “rational idiots” (Sen 2005; Gamel 2007). They are primarily regarded as having an agency, a “power to act” (Sen 1985b, 1987b, 1987c). While explicitly rejecting a connection with the paradigm of methodological individualism (Sen 2009: 298), this more widely conveys the idea of an individual who is both an actor in his decisions, responding to multiple values that are not reduced to utility maximization, and shaped by social constraints: “(we do, of course, as individuals, think about issues and choose and perform actions), but we cannot end there without an appreciation of the deep and pervasive influence of society on our ‘thinking, choosing and doing’” (Sen 2009: 245). In other words, the Senian individual is likely to treat social experience reflexively, to pay attention to social events occurring in his environment, to be attentive to the reactions of others to his own actions, but also where necessary to define different lines of action and goals that are of value to him (Zimmermann 2006: 471; Salais 2009: 13). However, although the presence of socially incorporated properties is recognized, leading in particular to forging a “positional objectivity” (Sen 2005; Monnet 2007), his preoccupations do not lead him to question the way in which the social shapes the individual, these properties being considered more as a given or an “already there.”

Through their social belonging and their history, individuals thus have tastes and preferences that can be ranked among themselves, even if only in a relative and partial way (Sen 2005: 468). In his early writings, Sen refers to John Dewey and the notion of valuation as a process of attribution of value (Sen 1984; Dewey 2011), which can be illustrated in the sphere of work by different forms of “drivers of action”: to build a career, better reconcile work and family, change jobs, establish one’s own
business, etc. However, despite some comments that have discerned a “tendency towards a more comprehensive perception of the studied phenomenon” (Bonvin 2011, § 1), the capability approach does not seem to be able to be placed directly alongside the Weberian approach, its preoccupation being not to apprehend the meaning of what individuals say they have “reasons to value.” More simply and descriptively, “the capability approach is primarily concerned with the identification of objects of value” (Sen 1992: 81), separating in particular two questions aimed at defining, on the one hand, what is the set of objects valued by a given entity whether that is an individual or a group of individuals, and on the other hand, the respective values of each of the component objects of this set. Far from being pure immanent products or the result of a strictly rational calculation, these “values” — in other words what individuals want to achieve overall — are the result of a social interaction that determines both what seems to them desirable and what it seems possible to achieve (Sen 1987b). This attention to expectations leads Sen to question the formation of adaptive preferences, i.e. situations in which the oppressed person learns so well how to bear his burden that he or she ends up neglecting it (Sen 1984: 309) or in which people learn to “concentrate their desires on the little things that they can eventually achieve, rather than aspiring in vain to that which is out of reach” (Sen 1992: 98), an idea that has echoes for sociologists of the phenomena of self-censorship and internalization of the probable described in particular by Pierre Bourdieu (1974).

The Senian analysis, however, is not confined to the mere observation of expressed tastes or preferences, as is the case in utilitarian perspectives, but also observes the individual in action. One part of valued situations, which Sen calls *functionings* and which constitute “all that it is possible to do in life, all the ways of being and acting of individuals” (Sen 1993: 31) is capable of being materialized and realized through a series of choices and actions, resulting in a set of accomplishments or achievements that are either acts (*doing*) or states (*being*) and bearers of meaning for individuals. Consequently, an individual’s life behaviour can be understood as a “set of accomplishments or achievements” (Maric 1996: 101; Bonvin and Farvaque 2008: 47–8), an illustration of which may once again be drawn from the world of work (e.g. obtaining a coveted post, avoiding unwanted geographical mobility, and maintaining a timetable compatible with family life) (Salais 2009: 8). The essential point here is to distinguish what has been achieved and what remains as hopes and plans. Not all *functionings* are necessarily accessible, at least for the time being, because they require the mobilization of various *commodities* or *endowments*, which are sometimes freely accessible although more often controlled by individuals or institutions. As such, and in a broader way than a perspective that takes account of capital owned and incorporated by individuals, Sen’s work evokes rights or *opportunities of access* to entitlements, i.e. the “power of command [over property] through the legal means in force in a society” (Sen 1981: 45). This is further illustrated by Sen with examples from the occupational sphere, such as being accepted to receive training to access the desired position, obtaining bank guarantees and loans providing the initial funds for the foundation of a company, and so on. From this point of view, the capability approach also attempts to capture the conversion mechanisms allowing the passage of available resources or access rights to actual achievements corresponding to valued situations (Sen 1985b, 1992, 1999a). Indeed, depending on the context, two persons with similar resources and access rights (eg educational qualifications, formal rights of access to a given position) are not necessarily equally placed to use them in order to obtain their desired achievements (Bonvin and Moachon 2013: 781). However, as several commentators...
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Note, although “the concept of conversion is central ... Sen does not propose any specification of it” (Zimmermann 2008: 121). An attempt at clarification by the definition of three conversion factors is provided by Ingrid Robeyns (2000, 2003, 2005a: 99), and these are “individual” (depending on the acquisition of competences, on physical characteristics, etc.), “social” (relative to the network of intercognition, marking by certain stereotypes, etc.), or “environmental” (relating to the political and institutional context) (Caillaud and Zimmermann 2011: 42; Mazade 2014: 97).

All these considerations make it possible to see that the interaction of valuations and rights of access lays out a space of possibilities and choices, in which functionings, that are valued but not accessible due to lack of sufficient resources or entitlements, may be differentiated from achievements that are accessible but not valued and from situations that are accessible and valued. It is this set of accessible situations that are referred to as capabilities. For Sen, this concept “reflects the various combinations of functioning that an individual can perform, and among which he can make his choice” (Sen 1993: 31). It is then possible to speak of “capabilities,” “space of capabilities” or “structure of opportunities” (Farvaque and Robeyns 2005: 40, Salais 2007: 6) an idea whose similarity to that of “field of possibilities” (Bourdieu 1997) or of “possible worlds” (Demazière and Dubar 1997) deserves to be discussed at greater length (Lambert and Vero 2007), but which may in part explain the relative rejection of Sen’s ideas by sociologists with similar conceptual tools which they perhaps judged to be more operationalisable. The structure of opportunities, which is ultimately the object of study of the capability approach, is therefore created at the junction between valuations, resources, access and conversion operators, and makes it possible to connect this approach to the “intentionalist pole” and the “actionist schema” described by J.-M. Berthelot (2001).

In short, capabilities refer to a “power of choice” (Canto-Sperber 1991: 35) within an “opportunity freedom” (Salais 2009: 9) making it thus theoretically possible to evaluate the distance between actual achievements and the “freedom” to achieve (Maric 1996: 100). Indeed “they identify the real alternatives that we have before us.” In this sense, “capability can be seen as a reflection of the concrete ‘thickness’ of freedom.” (Sen 1992: 90). Although it is very delicate to handle (Igersheim 2013), the notion of freedom is nevertheless posed and debated. By using Isaiah Berlin’s (1969) interpretation, Sen distinguishes between “negative freedom” and “positive freedom” (Sen 1988: 272), the former designating “the space within which a man can act without others preventing it” (Berlin 1969: 171), which refers to interrogating the degree of constraint on the individual, answering the questions “How far am I controlled?” or “How much am I governed?”; while the second examines the possibility of “being one’s own master,” in other words, examines who controls the action and asks the questions “Who controls me? or “By whom am I governed?” “(Berlin 2008: 326). For Sen, it is in this sense that “development can be apprehended ... as a process of expansion of real (i.e. positive) freedoms that individuals enjoy” in other words, “a process of expansion of individual capabilities” (Sen 1999: 13–8). He effectively questions the forms of social choice that may lead to this expansion (Sen 2005), for example in the structuring of the labour market and the organization of work (Verd and Vero 2011: 6; Didry 2013: 538). If this implies in the view of some people that we should understand the capability approach “as a practical philosophy of collective action” (Salais 2009: 16), it appears – as in the dimensions of construction of the individual – that Sen does not provide the details of the mechanisms of collective and/or political action. In the tradition of John Dewey, he advocates the
virtues of democracy and dialogue more than he analyzes them (Sen 1999b) – the way he conceives of this having been discussed elsewhere (Cohen 1990; Bénicourt 2005a) – or what he calls, after Stuart Mill and W. Bagehot, “government through discussion” (Sen 2009: 13). Although “public discussion [...] is the means to promote the emergence of common values and commitments” (Sen 1999a: 253), how to understand the way in which it is composed and the collective organization that accompanies it are not among his central questions.

However if one follows his argument, the maximization of the utility promoted by the marginalist economy is ultimately replaced by a maximization of capabilities, since public policies have a “vested interest” in tending towards an increase in real freedoms, rather than concentrating on the equalization of the distribution of resources alone. Thus, from amongst the descriptive, normative or prescriptive postures defined by the thinkers of political economy (Keynes, 1891), the Senian approach very clearly adopts the second, which cannot fail to lead to mistrust on the part of sociologists whose discipline itself was built around a conflict with economics over normativity (Steiner 2008), and even by the masking of its own normative foundations (Munck 2011). The very possibility of operating a sociological reasoning based on Senian conceptions, which some commentators of the approach call for (Eymard-Duvernay 2008: 209; Didry 2013: 546) thus needs to be examined.

A rich but controversial programme

There have been many lively and long-standing debates about Sen’s work in the English-speaking world (Sugden 1986, 1993; Cohen 1990; Roemer 1994, 1996) and more recently in Francophone academia (Bénicourt 2002, 2004, 2005b, 2007; Robeyns 2002; Favarque and Robeyns 2005a, 2005b). On reading the corpus of articles collected, the criticisms formulated by economists, philosophers and sociologists can be divided into two groups. The first is epistemological and points to the aporias engendered by the conception of social functioning which underlies the notion of capability. The second is more methodological, focusing mainly on the rejection of the principle of incompleteness advocated by Sen, but also on the limitations of the empirical applicability of his approach.

The anthropological conception developed by Sen considers that individuals have the power to act (“agency”) as well as preferences and goals whether they are “adaptive” or not (Gilardone 2007, 2009, 2010; Ballet and Mahieu 2009). As such, Sen is part of a particularly demanding grammar of responsibility as analysed by J.-L. Genard (1999, 2007), which may also explain in part the favourable reception given to the Indian author by those institutions advocating an “activation” of individuals in the field of social policies (Genard and Cantelli 2008). Sen evokes, for example, a “necessity to consider each individual as particularly responsible for what depends on him. On the other hand, one [i.e. the researcher or the evaluator] does not attribute to him responsibility or credit for what he could not have changed” (1992: 241). Similarly, he says that “the freedoms and capabilities we enjoy can also be valuable and it is we, ultimately, who decide how we will use them. [...] another important aspect of freedom, is that it makes us responsible for our actions. [...] The implications of the capability approach intersect with concerns centred on the role of agent” (2009: 44–5). In other words, “individuals are implicitly perceived as not
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The notion of adaptive preferences, however, suggests that cultural or institutional elements may weigh on the individual. Similarly, he interacts with his social environment in complex and sometimes conflicting relationships, as the use of notions of access rights and conversion factors illustrate. In this sense, “an attentive reader of Sen can easily find many elements tending towards an institutionalist perspective” (Farvaque and Robeyns 2005: 47). Nevertheless, Sen does not focus on an explanatory theorisation of social or organizational functioning, on more informal social groups, on how collective decisions are made, or on the issues of power and domination that may run through such decisions (Fleurbaey 2003; Zimmermann 2008; Mazade 2014). In his approach, social functioning remains a “black box” that can be seen only in the finished production of cultural elements, norms, resources, etc., without the observer knowing anything about the processes at work. The blind spots on the descriptive and explanatory level thus seem to be significant ones, leading proponents of a Marxist perspective to the view that “theories of justice [including that of Sen] have a typically petty bourgeois style: individualism, ignorance of the class struggle, the search for an optimal compromise” (Fleurbaey 2003: 48). Moreover, critics of the Senian analysis emphasize his “optimistic” or even “angelic” character. The Indian author insists on the possibility of a collective and consensual agreement concerning the achievements that can be valued and realized without defining the conditions (Sugden 1986: 821, 1993: 1952). In other words, and by way of example, he is silent when it comes to understanding what happens when individuals’ evaluations are at odds with those of an institution that has to take charge of them: for example, unemployed persons wishing to find a job in a sector which they are desperate to enter, but where the employment agency knows that it cannot find them jobs, situations which are to a great extent seen in terms of the sociology

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of employment and occupational placement. (Divay 2009; Zunigo 2008). Conversely, defenders of the Senian perspective play their role by arguing subtly that: “Sen in no way seeks to ensure unlimited real freedom for each member of the community. Collective action always takes place under the constraint of resources, and it is therefore important to make trade-offs between the various purposes that can be assigned to it. ... it is not a matter of guaranteeing everyone the possibility and the real freedom to become a doctor or prime minister, but to give each person a minimum capacity to act.” (Bonvin 2005: 77), the study of this “minimal” threshold having been at the core of Nussbaum’s work (2012).

On the basis of these first two points, it appears that although Sen’s work focuses on universal situations and essential social problems (e.g. famine, poverty, gender equality) from the point of view of the sociological focus and its theoretical scope, the capability approach is situated at an intermediate level between “micro” and “macro,” and seeks above all to interpret the articulation between these two levels rather than proposing a displacement of this dichotomy. The capability approach thus provides information on the way in which institutions and individuals may combine with varying degrees of success in the achievement of the choices made by the latter, which constitutes an already considerable field of investigation. However, in view of its “incompleteness,” which leaves many positions unresolved, it does not constitute a paradigm in the usual sense of the term (Kuhn 1972; Berthelot 1998), as for example could be applied to functionalism, interactionism, structuralism, etc., in that it does not offer a systematic interpretation of social functioning. Next, therefore, I describe what it proposes in terms of the collection and organisation of empirical data.

Although Sen may well have been trained in the use of formalisation methods based on measurable indicators, the capability approach does not provide methodological tools in the strict sense. Moreover, unlike some of his imitators (Nussbaum 2008: 2012), Sen refuses to propose a closed, let alone universal, list of “capabilities” that should be studied or even protected. He has repeatedly expressed his reservations about “forcing” the definition of precise indicators: “Highlighting the complexity of social situations and especially his [own] political liberalism, Sen intends to leave his version of the capability approach deliberately incomplete, and does not claim to be developing a theory of justice with clearly defined principles” (Gilardone 2010: 23). While this is commendable, it raises the question of whether it is possible to compare individuals from the point of view of their respective capabilities in the context of research or evaluation, each of which is likely to highlight very different achievements, thus threatening observation with relativism (Monnet 2007). In the absence of a formal list or indicators, how can we go beyond the mere definition of capabilities as “various combinations of functionings that an individual might achieve, and among which he can make his choice” (Sen 1993: 31); even more problematic is the question of how would we be able to evaluate a structure of opportunities. In other words, how could one establish a metrology of capabilities, a concept that is more concerned with possibilities than with facts, which leads us to consider a potentially vast, necessarily fuzzy and fluctuating information base involving what could be defined as “a construction under construction” (Didry 2013: 546). The operationalization of the concepts proposed by Sen is clearly left to the discretion of each researcher or evaluator (Farvaque 2006: 167), which makes them malleable and potentially inconsistent. Some argue that it would leave researchers “between two stools” (Bénicourt 2007: 77) and would not provide the evaluators with any means
“to achieve the objectives it proposes” (Bénicourt 2004: 78–9). As Claude Gamel (2007: 142) reminds us, “[researchers] also do not hide the difficulties they encounter in reconstructing, from the available data, the capability of each individual – the totality of lifestyles accessible to them – beyond the sole way of life actually observed.” Among the institutions interested in the capability approach, difficulties are also foremost. In this way, Sen’s writings are described as being of “awkward interest” to certain specialists working in the field of official statistics, their difficulty being primarily “how to measure technically the non-monetary dimensions of poverty” or the extent of a capability-space (Hauchecorne 2010: 81). Aware of this difficulty, Sen was able to propose a truncated version of his approach: “Ideally, the capability approach should take into account the full extent of the freedom to choose between different bundles of functionings, but practical constraints often require us to limit the analysis to the examination of the group of achieved functionings alone.” (Sen 1992: 96). Although criticism of the lack of operationalization has a long history – John Roemer (1996: 193), for example, states that “Sen makes necessity a virtue by writing that certain difficult questions do not have adequate answers” (Munck and Zimmermann 2008: 29), which has come to be described as the capability approach’s ‘knowing incompleteness’, and this refusal to propose tools of macroeconomic policy, or in other words to adopt a prescriptive stance (Keynes, 1891), does not appear to pose insurmountable difficulties from a sociological point of view, and on the contrary, it allows the notion to retain its analytic power by avoiding having to confine it to certain types of situations (Hollywood et al. 2012: 474). The construction of indicators capable of recording the “capabilities” of individuals is increasingly becoming a rich field of study, the prospect of “methodologically complementing” the capability approach being considered as a stimulating field of reflection (Zimmermann 2006, 469, Agee and Crocker 2013). As we shall see, this metrological difficulty, first put forward by advocates of mathematical modelling and the orthodox economy (Gries and Naudé 2011), has led some French-speaking authors to draw on the capability approach to favour “qualitative” approaches, seen as being more flexible with respect to measurement (Farvaque 2008).

Not therefore a paradigm in the full sense, neither does the capability approach seem to provide a model that deals with the relations between specific and clearly identified indicators (Gilardone 2010: 19). In the end, critical responses to it instead tend more modestly to identify it as a “program” (in the sense intended by Lakatos 1970), ie “a research perspective in a given field at a given moment [that] is expressed as basic propositions or axioms, which define both the ontology and the epistemology of the program. [...] A program is thus a kind of bet on how fertile a research direction will be” (Berthelot 2001: 469–70). Ultimately, beyond the formal criticisms that have been made in this section, it was N. Farvaque and I. Robeyns, responding to E. Bénicourt, who in the end asked the question which probably matters most: “What does his interpretative framework give us?” (2005: 45). Does it provide or allow better knowledge of social phenomena? Does the capability approach provide explanatory power? This also raises the epistemological question of the extent to which a perspective derived from normative economics can be used for sociology (Bertin 2005a, 2005b), which is historically marked by a positivist spirit based both on Hume’s prohibition (Walliser 2001; Munck 2011) and on an interpretation of Weber’s axiological neutrality (Weber 2005).
Using “capabilities” to question work and employment

Work drawing on the capability approach to study phenomena related to work and employment has been on the rise since the early 2000s. The study of the collected corpus makes it possible to isolate 84 articles dealing specifically with this research topic, i.e. 7.7% of the total (see Annex 2). Each of these articles provides an interpretation and deployment of Sen’s work to answer its own research questions. This section aims to analyze how they use the capability approach, attempt to circumvent the limits mentioned, or propose adjustments that favour the processing of empirical data. It will be seen that these studies draw upon the work of Sen in a rather limited manner, and that they propose what are in some cases innovative methodologies for collection of relevant data, while producing a discourse where descriptive, normative and prescriptive elements are combined, though sometimes in fluctuating and indistinct ways.

As a first observation, it should be noted that the works studied draw upon the writings of Sen in a rather parsimonious way, the number of references being relatively low, in contrast to those given to secondary accounts of his work and to authors discussing his work, which are abundantly cited (e.g. Bonvin, Farvaque, Nussbaum, Robeyns, Salais), a pattern which is typical when using a number of “great” authors. Of the 84 articles, two-thirds cite fewer than five direct references to Sen’s writings in their bibliography. Rather than quoting from Sen and comparing his conceptual definitions with the data collected, authors more frequently prefer to state that they “take inspiration” from the capability approach or “borrow” its concepts, following the approach literally to some extent, and helping to strengthen the idea of it being seen as a research program. In my view, they illustrate Robert Salais’s proposition that the object is not “to apply Sen, but to develop a capability approach based on his theoretical and methodological premises. This is because the concepts and the theoretical framework of Sen must be interpreted and concretized according to the research fields involved” (Salais 2009). At the same time, the articles’ bibliographical apparatus makes it possible to identify their area of production, with the English-speaking authors systematically referring to Nussbaum or Robeyns, while the Francophone authors relate more readily to the publications of Salais or Bonvin, corroborating the process of diffusion of the capability approach within the European research area.

Similarly, the authors focus on the use of one or two concepts rather than on the articulation of the whole oeuvre as presented in the previous sections. Effectively, the notions of capability and freedom are given a privileged status, appearing in all publications, the other notions of the Senian semantic space being used in a more limited way: functioning or achievement (80% of articles), agency (54% of articles), conversion (50% of articles), entitlement or right of access (36% of articles), valuation (14% of articles). Here again, although Sen indicates the necessity for each researcher to adapt the capability approach to the case that concerns them, the reader sometimes feels the authors are using “cosmetic” or “bolted-on” concepts which do not belong to the implementation of the Senian perspective. At the same time, the potential frequently highlighted by Sen’s critics (Zimmermann 2006, 2008; Gilardone 2007; Farvaque 2008; Genard and Cantelli 2008; Gamel 2013) to add concepts to the capability approach derived from the “pragmatist trend” (Ogien 2014), which also focuses on “people as agents” (Bénatouil 1999: 297; Berthelot 2001) is only marginally exploited in the empirical works present in the corpus.
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As has been mentioned, the difficulty of methodological implementation is one of the main criticisms addressed to the capability approach (Robeyns 2000, 2005b; Saith 2001; Comim 2001; Zimmermann 2006; Muffels and Headey 2013). Aiming to address this issue, the articles in question specify fairly broadly the methodological efforts made with a view to “operationalizing” the Senian program, whether they chose quantitative data (30.9% of articles) or qualitative (40.5% of articles).

As Bonvin and Farvaque (2007: 16) point out in relation to quantitative studies, “the main difficulty is that of building up data on the capability of a person or group or, more modestly, that of the conversion of available data into a form that could be used for interpretation in terms of ‘capabilities’ or ‘functioning’.” To this end, some of these studies attempt to use administrative databases (Zimmermann 2006: 475), especially those with longitudinal data, insofar as “analysis of people’s freedom of choice and their space of possibilities requires a dynamic approach” (Germain and Olympio 2012: 14). For example, France uses data from the INSEE “Employment Survey” (Lambert and Vero 2007) or the Direction de l’évaluation, de la prospective et de la performance du ministère de l’Éducation nationale (Directorate for Evaluation, Foresight and Development of Performance of the Ministry of National Education), which follows educational paths from the sixth grade to the beginning of working life by using criteria concerning “choice of career path.” Similarly, the European Social Survey provides information on work-life balance in European lifestyles, but also on the actual conditions of its realization (Hobson and Falhén 2009). Other authors favour an ad hoc survey based on the development of specific indicators to measure the extent of opportunity structures, such as Tania Burchardt (2002) or Paul Anand and Martin van Hees (2006), who focus on “real freedom to work, not on whether or not one has a job,” by asking respondents to evaluate their “margins of freedom” in terms of employment. The questionnaire thus elaborated aims to estimate the extent of the space of opportunities available to individuals as well as their perception of that of other social groups, giving an indication on their assessment of their social position.

However, data collection through interviews or case studies is favoured in the literature, with so-called “qualitative” methods being more likely to reveal the extent of opportunity structures and conversion mechanisms (Robeyns 2005a; Bryson and Meritt 2007; Bonvin and Farvaque 2007; Farvaque 2008; Verd and Lopez 2011). As Corteel and Zimmermann (2007: 27) state: “Having considered empirical operationalization [...] we preferred a qualitative method.” Specific interview guides are proposed in order to precisely describe capabilities. The method developed by Pierre Falzon et al. (2008) provides, for example, three indicators to “detect” the perception of quality work, sense of usefulness at work and learning opportunities, indicators complemented by questions about creativity (“Can you do the work you want?”) and autonomy (“Can you choose how to do it?”), all questions well-known to sociologists of work. In the majority of cases, the overall question is about “how people perceive the development of their abilities at work and opportunities for development” (Bryson and Meritt 2007: 46), in other words how to grasp the subjective experience of an objective situation.

The line of analysis proposed by Sen (1996: 110), stipulating the importance of “considering options that have not been chosen, but which one can choose quite freely, or even those it was quite impossible to select,” in other words relying on counterfactual reasoning, ie “what a person would choose if he could choose” (Sen 1992: 117), is ultimately little used, notwithstanding the relevance of such a question.
In spite of the methodological efforts and the “inexorable impossibility of getting a quantitative grasp of all the possibilities” (Bonvin and Farvaque 2007: 18), research is oriented more towards effective functionings, a reduction that is also justified in the sense that it may be “necessary to start from functionings in order to achieve a partial but significant view of the freedoms enjoyed by different individuals” (Farvaque 2008: 63). As an incidental effect, the authors thus shift from the analysis of capabilities or structures of opportunity to that of “capacitating situations,” leading to blurring the boundary between descriptive analysis and normative or even prescriptive proposition.

The works studied seem in part to heed the warning to “not fall into the pitfall of a normative or idealistic use of Sen’s concepts. To the extent that the capability approach defines a very demanding standard of human development, the comparison of reality with this standard is likely to lead to very critical findings justifying the denunciation of the persistence of practices of oppression and domination, beyond superficial changes” (Bonvin 2007: 254). Whether quantitative or qualitative methods are used, the processing of data in the articles comprising the corpus regularly leads to the establishment of typologies, for example, categorizing “individual trajectories” (Germain and Olympia 2012) “forms of enterprise management” (Corteel and Zimmermann 2007; Zimmermann 2011; Lambert et al. 2012) or even “career development policies” (Bryson and Meritt 2007).

Moving from an analysis of processes to that of ontologies, these articles come to a kind of ideal-typical conception of what would be “capacitating” - a situation increasing the “real freedoms” of individuals - and consider some of the categories of their typology as being more “capacitating” than others with regard to this ideal-typical form. For example, it is stated that “a career path that is really ‘capabilizing’ would be a trajectory that is not only not determined and reversible at any moment but also and above all truly chosen by the individual” (Germain and Olympia 2012: 27). Similarly, the characteristics of “capability-building organizations” (Lambert et al. 2010) are revealed, with case studies also leading to “identifying three types of enterprises considered from the point of view of their training policy: organizations for updating skills, learning organizations and capability-building organizations” (Caillaud and Zimmermann 2011: 39). Moreover, a series of propositions slide from a description of reality to the determination to transform it through the political orientation accompanying the capability approach. “Fostering an ‘enabling’ environment” (Fernagu-Oudet 2012), “to re-establish and develop the factors of career development [in order to] design and anticipate a ‘capacitating’ organization, a source of development, success and progress” (Arnoud and Falzon 2013: 127). Highly commendable in principle, the proposals formulated are sometimes tinged with a form of ingenuity that is an echo of the evacuation of relations of power and domination for which the capability approach is sometimes criticized. Among other examples, it is stated that “a fully empowered school system should thereby free individuals from socio-economic determinisms. It must ensure that a multitude of choices is possible for all people and promote the reversibility of these choices” (Germain and Olympia 2012), or that “the main task of public policies is to develop the capabilities of everyone” (Bonvin and Farvaque 2007: 12). Ultimately, the research programme being announced is based on two ideas: that “a scrupulous inventory of current practices on the ground would reveal actions that move in the right direction” (Salais 2005: 13) and that of defining “capacitation strategies” (Bonvin 2009), on the model of “best practices” dear to the management sciences and under the guise of a better
alliance between ethics and social and economic “performance.” At best, this use of the capability approach can be seen as an attempt by some social scientists to weigh into social debate, a mission which economics or sociology both embrace, but in different ways (Baudelot and Mairesse 2005). From this point of view, and without reverting to the Weberian point of view, which clearly distinguishes the moment for research from the moment for political action (Weber 1965 2005), the risk is of making capabilities the alpha and omega of analysis and action, leading to a confusion between the analytical category and the practical category, which at the very least questions the degree of circularity of a theorization advocating change based on its own analytical tools.

The study of “potentialities” as an area of dialogue?

At this point in the article, and as with any debate on the scope of a theoretical system (Steiner 2008), the alternatives seem straightforward: either to consider that the capability approach raises too many conceptual difficulties and refers to too great a number of aporias, leading to opt for its replacement, or its pure and simple rejection; or to see, in spite of its limitations, aspects worthy of being worked on or adjusted, because they could enrich research that has a sociological purpose. As the study of the corpus has led me to lean towards the second option, this last section will set out some of the epistemological reflections that leads to instituting the capability approach. Without going back over the aspects already mentioned by several commentators, such as the participation of the Senian program in a form of “social criticism” (Salais 2009; Munck 2011), I will discuss the importance given to counterfactual reasoning, the specification of the concept of agency and the use of the idea of conversion factors, three points touching on the analysis of social potentialities.

Given the very definition of the concept of capability and the attention given to opportunity structures, the Senian approach is as concerned with the actions actually carried out by individuals, their functioning, as with eventualities that have not yet occurred, thus making it possible “to analyze the space of choice of the individual and to differentiate the real choices from the constrained choices” (Germain and Olympio 2012:14). This perspective allows counterfactual reasoning to be a methodological tool in its own right, even if it might be thought to be underemployed. This process, consisting of questioning along the lines of “what would have happened if...?” or “Could what happened have happened otherwise?,” has long been used explicitly in philosophy (Stalnaker 2013), notably by Isaiah Berlin (1954), one of Sen’s influences. It has also demonstrated its heuristic power in history and particularly in the analysis of industrial innovations (Deluermoz and Singaravélou 2012). In sociology, the use of counterfactuals is less widespread, although Max Weber (1965), in his essays on the theory of science, saw in it a way of revealing the causal meaning attributable to an individual decision within a wider set of forces. By applying the “unobserved pathways” approach, the capability approach could be closer to the work of Andrew Abbott (2001) and that dealing with the analysis of bifurcation processes (Fabiani 2003; Grossetti 2004; Bessin et al. 2010). Indeed, “for there to be bifurcation, a situation must have several outlets sufficiently equivalent for the occurrence of one or the other to be the result of an at least partially contingent process. It is therefore necessary to go through the definition of possible outcomes that have not occurred” (Grossetti 2004: 191). In the context of a longitudinal survey
of career paths, this allows us to look at what was perceived at one time as an open structure but whose opportunities were eventually limited. However, although the counterfactual reasoning mechanism is known, it is most often implicitly used by social science researchers (Dehurmoz and Singaravelou 2012: 80), whereas making it explicit, as in the capability approach, allows us to reinterrogate the causal continuum from determinism to contingency. It also makes it possible to question retrodictions (ie situations presented by individuals in the conditional past), without limiting them to simple strategic reconstructions, such as, for example, surveys on integration into a workplace or occupational mobility situations (Barbier and Seiller 2015). As Grossetti (2004: 192) points out, the explicit use of counterfactual reasoning has the advantage of “working with the imagination and logic of causal chains. It is not an easy exercise, but if one fails to do so, one runs the risk of falling into the trap of either a historicism that considers events as incommensurable, or a structural determinism in which what happened had necessarily to happen.”

Starting from this plurality of alternatives and endings, the developments of the capability approach presented in the corpus being studied also question the notion of agency and lead to readdressing power relations, largely absent from the original writings of Sen. Emerging from a long philosophical tradition that runs through Hegel and Dewey (Mackenzie 2012), agency has been widely adopted, has been widely appropriated by feminism (Achin and Naudier 2013), and is now mainly used in the context of gender studies based on the work of Judith Butler (2006), in whose work the notion of agency allows us to address the propensity of individuals to “conform, but also to resist, to play and to foil, to transform” (Haicault 2012: 12). In other words, agency may favour the observation of the circumvention of norms and the phenomena of non-reproduction (Butler 2006: 15), for example in the context of the struggles against domination at work (Guérin 2003; Gallot and Meuret-Campfort 2015). Far from making agency an essentialised anthropological trait, the capability approach makes distinctions of degree in this “power to act,” by studying how it marks individuals in context and relationally (Herdt and Bastiaensen 2009). In other words, the notion of capability makes it possible to specify that of agency by interrogating the freedoms of action and the options chosen (Kotan 2009; Robertson 2015), in particular those of subversion and the overthrow of objects of domination, such as research on “capability for voice” in work groups (Bonvin and Farvaque 2005b; Munck and Ferreras 2013), a dimension that specifies the conditions for creating potential ‘government through discussion’. This also leads to questioning the reflexivity of individuals and the social conditions of the possibility of “conscious agency” (Haicault 2012: 14), insofar as “one of the most obvious conditions necessary for me to be able to act as a free agent, or that I recognize my actions as mine, is, on the one hand, that I am capable of ‘knowing my own state of mind’, of knowing my own attitudes, my commitments, dispositions, preferences, etc., and, on the other hand, that I am also capable of engaging in a kind of reflection on the relative weight of various motives, of assessing the degree of my engagement, to understand what is the motive that would make me act in each given situation, and so on.” (Pippin 2006: 99). Luc Boltanski says much the same thing when he analyzes the conditions of emancipation and re-examines the relations of domination, which, according to him, require “the taking into account of capacities for action. One might distinguish, in this respect, firstly actors who have a wide range of capacities for action not only over their own lives but also over the lives of a greater or lesser number of other people. Secondly, actors who have relative control of actions that concern their own
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lives but have few means of constraining those of others. Thirdly, and finally, actors who have no control over their own lives or those of others.” (Boltanski 2009: 224).

Finally, one of the most interesting notions of the capability approach, and one already being used in sociology, seems to me to be that of conversion factors. Widely used in the Bourdieusian program (Blasius and Friedrichs 2003), the notion is nevertheless under-referenced theoretically and occupies an ambiguous position in it (Fernex and Compeyron 2007: 211). For Bourdieu, the idea of conversion refers to the “transmutability” of forms of capital (Bourdieu 1972), in other words to the processes by which economic capital contributes to the acquisition of cultural or social capital, or any other combination. However, the use of the Senian approach leads to a reinterrogation of the notion, insofar as it considers not only the capital incorporated or possessed as such, but more broadly the resources to which individuals have access, these resources being converted into capabilities and then into effective achievements (functionings). Indeed, the notion of resources includes that of capital but also that of institution and social support, in other words the environment of the individual, whether that be infrastructure, equipment or mechanisms of public action. By way of illustration, the example of “local exchange systems,” present to varying degrees in different geographical areas, demonstrates an institutional mechanism allowing the conversion of individual know-how into an extension of the social network, (Blasius and Friedrichs 2003). Similarly, the differentiation of managerial policies by companies reveals how the right to parental leave is actually taken into account and supported, even though a “better work-family balance” is valued and aspired to by the majority of employees in European countries (Hobson 2011). Taken in this sense and related to capabilities, the notion of conversion also makes it possible to think about the displacements taking place between social settings by questioning, for example, the articulation between the occupational, family and/or recreational spheres (Bryson and Meritt 2007; Salais 2009: 4; Hobson 2011, 2014; Pandolfini 2012). On this point, and in the same way as Alain Fernex and Arielle Compeyron (2007: 242), we might consider appealing for a dialogue between the Senian and the Bourdieusian programs, because in much the same way that capital does not pass automatically to heirs, it does not make the resources to which individuals have access grow either. However, even though the capability approach does not focus on the ways in which capital and resources are acquired, it invites us to observe how they are actually converted as well as the social supports that lead to this conversion.

Ultimately, and even if it involves solving many problems that are both theoretical and methodological, the Senian perspective and its developments tend to offer sociologists exciting paths to explore, making it possible at the very least to re-interpret a series of existing studies from a different angle. In the work and employment sector, the approach seems particularly fruitful as a way of understanding the processes of creating and managing career paths (occupational integration, mobility, re-training, work-family connection, etc.); dimensions which alone deserve specific study.


* * *

Is the capability approach, which is part of the political economy of Amartya Sen and complements his reflections on democracy, theories of justice and social
choice, compatible with sociological work? In this article, the explicitly normative dimension of the capability approach (eg maximizing individual capabilities, valuing democracy as a principle of action) tends to appear to be one of the main obstacles to the establishment of a calm dialogue, given that economics and sociology have periodically opposed each other over the positive and normative aims of the social sciences since the founding of the Durkheimian school (Baudelot and Mairesse 2005; Steiner 2008). The idea of an a-normative sociology was a myth from the moment that the discipline claimed to have any effect on the world, with all production of critical discourse assuming that an alternative to what is denounced is possible and desirable (eg descriptions of mechanisms of inequality or domination often imply that another social functioning is possible, in other words a new norm of social relations can be adopted) (Munck 2011). Thus, as Philippe Steiner (2008) has shown, sociological criticism of economics is in fact a criticism made in the name of certain social norms against other social norms. What ultimately tends to discourage sociologists in the work emanating from currents of political economy is the implicit understanding of normative modalities of expression and how of the results of the research are used. To caricature: even though economists and sociologists might both be channels for ideas on the improvement of the human condition, the former would be tempted to confine their inspiration to the tight circle of people likely to make collective decisions, while the latter would be more persuaded of the necessity for an appropriation of knowledge by the greatest number in order to increase their collective power. As Baudelot and Mairesse summarize it: “To advise the Prince here, to raise the masses, there.” (2005: 495). It is therefore conceivable that the mistrust of a large part of the sociological community with respect to the capability approach stemmed from an amalgam between the explicitly normative dimension of the approach, which also provides its critical weight, and the role of “counsellor to the powerful” played by Sen and some promoters of his approach. In the idea of a dialogue, it appears to me that one of the possible contributions of the capability approach is to invite sociologists to explain some of the bases of their reasoning, in particular the normative bases underlying the production of critical discourses. More broadly, the characterization of the capability approach as a possible “frontier theory” suggests increasingly diverse appropriations and the establishment of discussion with other research currents (eg pragmatism, life-course theory, gender studies), the fruits of which should be observed in the future. It is not, however, a question of echoing the laudatory remarks that have sometimes been made. Although it can be applied to many phenomena (eg poverty, education, health, social relations of sex, construction of public policy and action, work), the capability approach may after all appear in a relatively modest light, as shown by the analysis in this article. Not a paradigm in the strong sense of the word, it is primarily a research program – certainly an abundant and promising one – which is still to be explored and tested. On the empirical level, this perspective is also “medium-range” in that it focuses on the junction of individual situations (assessments, adaptive preferences, positional objectivity, etc.) and collective frameworks (resources, rights of access, etc.). Thus, the capability approach can undoubtedly be part of a reflection on a whole class of social phenomena affecting change, illustrated in the field of work by the topics of occupational integration, functional mobility, vocational retraining, etc., all on an increasingly well-trodden route leading to an understanding of the articulation between social pathways and public policies.
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GENERAL BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES


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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1.—Thematic bibliography
Commentaries and critiques of the capability approach


GILARDONE, M., 2007, Contexte, sens et portée de l’approche par les capacités de Amartya Kumar Sen, Doctoral thesis, Université Lyon II.


APPENDIX 2.—Thematic bibliography

The capability approach applied to work and employment

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