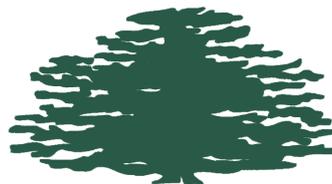


Amartya Sen: A Partial and Personal Appreciation

By

Ben Fine
2001



SOAS

University of London

Centre for Development Policy & Research (CDPR)

School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London
Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square, London WC1H 0XG, United Kingdom

Telephone: +44 (0)20 7898 4496,

Fax: + 44 (0)20 7898 4519,

E-mail: CDPR@soas.ac.uk

URL: <http://www.soas.ac.uk/centres/cdpr>

Amartya Sen: A Partial and Personal Appreciation*

By

Ben Fine

1. Introduction

The reaction by progressive economists of the award of the Nobel Prize to Amartya Sen has been mixed. Roughly, and setting aside nuances and inconsistencies over what he should or should not have got it for, there are two camps.¹ One, to which I belong,² welcomes it primarily for the recognition that it gives to an economist and, by implication, as Sen has himself modestly suggested, economists who cannot be placed in the mainstream. The other response is a mixture of criticism and cynicism that has worried rather than puzzled me. On probing, although they might not agree if it were put this way, the dissenters essentially pay Sen a huge compliment. Their gripe is that he has not handled this or that topic in the way that they would have done. In effect, this is to accept his intellectual capacity for doing so and, as important, the wish for their views to benefit from his stature and powers of exposition. In short, and moving on, unlike other erstwhile Nobel winners such as Friedman or Becker, whom the left must surely dismiss and who, if they were wished away, would have to be reinvented, Sen is unique and irreplaceable. First, he commands the two disciplines of economics and philosophy and is, thereby, truly interdisciplinary. Second, he is a scholar by which I mean in the modern context that he thoroughly investigates what others have to say and have said on an issue and decides upon his own contribution accordingly. Third, more than being a scholar, Sen is an intellectual. By this, I mean he is concerned with ideas, what is relevant to them from whatever source; with debate, especially against orthodoxy and with an eye to sophistication and elegance in both concept and technique; with being cultured far beyond the occasional literary reference; and, as already mentioned, Sen exercises considerable influence beyond the academy by virtue of harnessing his other qualities with his powers of exposition. Again the contrast with his fellow Nobel prizewinners is striking if one considers the lack of sophistication, knowledge and argument that marks the popularisations of Friedman and Friedman (1980) and Becker and Becker (1996), as they spread their few unacceptable insights too thinly across their subject matter, both economic and non-economic.³ Moreover, the topics on which Sen has chosen to exercise his faculties are hugely important – inequality, famine, development and freedom.

Each of the characteristics sets Sen apart from his bog-standard fellow economists. They are horrendously introverted within their own discipline, contemptuous of scholarship (all you need to know can be found in the latest articles), unconcerned with ideas, debate, culture, popular communication and dialogue. If you doubt this, sit in on any common room tea-break discussion amongst economists. Whatever the issue, the reductionism or implosion of its treatment to a few well-known verities can only astonish. This helps to explain the cynicism that surrounds Sen's award. For, first and foremost, all those qualities listed in the previous paragraph are, to coin the vernacular, subject to trade-offs.⁴ Sen must have unduly

compromised with the orthodoxy to have been accepted by it. If there is one outstanding feature of the Nobel Prize in economics, that even dominates its frequent lapses into eccentricity, it is its deep conservatism in favour of orthodoxy in what is an obsessively orthodox profession.⁵

Such cynicism is justified but not in being directed at Sen. For it derives from a beef against the increasingly extreme intolerance of mainstream economics towards any alternative. Sen is not responsible for this, nor is he complicit with it but has risen above it. I am not sure how I can offer proof for this proposition or even define it in less metaphorical terms. Instead, consider the ambiguities in the title to my piece. For it is partial in three senses. First, I cannot hope to draw upon a complete review of Sen's work, even in parts. He is too prolific, as have been those inspired or provoked by him.⁶ Second, Sen has supported me in my career as an academic for thirty years, long continuing to write references for me when he could reasonably have felt that such responsibilities had passed to others. I am bound to be favourably inclined towards him. Third, as will become clear, I am partial in the sense of having my own axes to grind, more so than is warranted in an "appreciation". The most important of these themes is the prospect for political economy, precisely because of the stranglehold of the mainstream.

In this light, this piece is also personal in three senses. First, and begging the reader's indulgence, there is more here on a personal level about me than there is about Sen. This is because my work as an academic economist can be used to inform Sen's position and contribution with, hopefully, some relevance for the experience of other political economists. More important, though, in assessing and promoting the prospects for political economy, my own capabilities, developments and freedoms in straddling mainstream, heterodoxy and development, have been both rare and increasingly foreclosed as far as others are concerned. Second, then, are similar options still open to others? Sen's personal success as an heterodox economist, and his interdisciplinarity in particular, are of importance in assessing what may or may not be possible for those that follow. Is he a unique exception or a trailblazer to be emulated and/or built upon? Finally, on a personal level, I have little, if not nothing to say about Sen himself. Where I ascribe motives or reasons for his work, these derive from it and not from him.

In the next section, I engage in a dialogue, however incompletely, with the evolution of Sen's thought as it moves from topic to topic although, as will be shown, his work constitutes a rich tapestry in which the patterns and motifs change without ever losing the thread of what came before. The journey from social choice to development as freedom is long and complex. It involves the incorporation of new themes – to formal ethics are added inequality, famine, capabilities and freedom. In retrospect, this raises an obvious issue. Has it been possible "to add on" these themes satisfactorily to the evolving analytical framework or must the latter be, and has it been, reconstructed as Sen's work has matured? By way of parallel with the rise of feminism across the social sciences, where common patterns and critiques have been followed, is it enough to add gender as a variable to pre-existing frameworks or must these be rejected? And, in postmodernist vein, how well are the notions of inequality, capability, development, and freedom grasped – just as we need both to gender our understanding and construct our understanding of gender?

Possibly testing the patience of the reader most concerned with Sen's more recent work, I will not be answering these questions directly. Rather, I focus on the ways in which they successively arisen with more emphasis on their origins in social choice theory and formal ethics. This is an important exercise in its own right as well as in informing those seeking to appraise the content and dynamic of his later work. On this basis, in section 3, I return to the themes of this introduction, focusing upon the prospects for political economy and how Sen has influenced them.

2. From Social Choice to Capabilities

In 1969, as I was completing an undergraduate degree in maths at Oxford, I was recruited by Jim Mirrlees to study postgraduate economics (with funding from the then SSRC, now ESRC). Having pretty well done nothing but maths from the age of fourteen, I knew absolutely nothing about economics. I remember being puzzled by what I would now recognise as how to understand the meaning and validity of the simple consumption function. Was it true or false or somewhere in-between? Despite this naiveté, I was thrown into the exclusive hothouse of the mathematical economics workshop.⁷ Almost immediately, I found I had something to contribute on social choice theory, recognising how it could be cast in terms of formal logic.⁸ From there, exploitation of my mathematical training and social choice theory proved the pragmatic route through which I established my qualifications as an academic economist. This led me to leave Oxford after two years to go to the London School of Economics for doctoral supervision under Sen.

Although well established as an academic economist, Sen's first major and extensive contribution was to social choice theory, initially culminating in Sen (1970) but subject to continuing contributions and reviews through Sen (1982) to the present day, including his Nobel acceptance speech, Sen (1999b). Interestingly, the press release and background paper for the award focus heavily on his contribution to social choice, as much as the rest of his work together which is primarily reduced to inequality and famine. None of his work after 1985 is cited. Possibly, this explains why Sen's acceptance speech should both focus upon social choice and strain it to embrace as wide a range of issues as possible. Yet Sen is probably best known for his work other than on social choice, and through an understanding that does not need to draw upon it, other than in his own intellectual trajectory. The weight of his work in social choice is marked much more by its technical virtuosity and problem-solving than by its irreducible or, more exactly, irreplaceable contribution to the conceptual content of later work. Nonetheless, the ethical and analytical content of the work on social choice is important in its own right, displaying both strengths and weaknesses, especially in how it contributes to his later work.

The problem of social choice is well known although much less prominent than previously.⁹ Take a given set of alternative states of the world and a given set of preferences or orderings over them from a given set of (voting) individuals. Then what should be the derived social ordering of the alternatives? The reason for this having been a problem within economics, rather than political science, is because of the wish of economists to work with a social welfare function or the like by which to choose between (the outcomes of) different policies. In addition, as posed, the problem conformed to the axiomatics of mainstream economics in terms of what was

“given” at the outset – rankings of alternatives by individuals by analogy with their preferences, and states of the world as opposed to initial endowments.

Initially, the field was dominated by Arrow’s Impossibility Theorem. Essentially, but through clever generalisation of the voting paradox, this denies the possibility of solving the problem of social choice if the decision mechanism were to satisfy a small number of apparently reasonable axioms. For the voting paradox, for three people A, B, and C, ranking over three alternatives as illustrated in the diagram, simple majority rule leads to each of x beating y, y beating x, and z beating x by two votes to one. This conundrum can be interpreted as a consequence of the axiom of irrelevant alternatives, I, making choice binary, a matter of comparing pairs of alternatives as if the others were not available or relevant to the comparison. In one part of my own work, pre-dominantly co-authored with my brother Kit, this was shown to be ridiculous, Fine and Fine (1974). Casual inspection of the voting paradox reveals that it is symmetrical in all individuals and alternatives taken together. This suggests, in the absence of any other information, that all alternatives (and individuals) should be treated as equal in social ranking (social indifference) – not least because merely swapping round the names of individuals and/or alternatives would leave the voting pattern unchanged. Further, by rejecting axiom I, a world of new axioms is opened up, not previously considered in view of the heavy weight of impossibility due to Arrow – moving up an alternative in an individual ranking from a position of symmetry should favour it in the social ranking; if two individual groups socially order one alternative over another, so should the combined group, and so on.

		Individuals		
		A	B	C
Ranking of Alternatives	x	y	z	
	y	z	x	
	z	x	y	

Sen’s contribution to social choice theory has been multifarious. In retrospect, three issues have remained important for continuing work. First, supposing the value of alternatives to different agents could be quantified, then interpersonal comparisons come to the fore – how much should one person’s welfare count against another’s? Second, as a dual problem, should interpersonal weights have been settled, then there is the problem of intensity of preference – how much weight should be given to one individual’s preferences in moving from one alternative to another.¹⁰ Third, to which less attention has understandably been devoted, there is the structure of choice itself. In particular, choice need not be complete or fully decided, whether for individuals or society. It is potentially helpful to exclude some alternatives or select a sub-sample as potentially desirable outcomes, not least through allowing a range of interpersonal comparisons or ordinality of preferences.¹¹

Crucially, for each of these issues, the analysis is purely formalistic, with both ethical and substantive issues on the backburner.¹² We have little or no idea who are the individuals and what are the alternatives over which they have preferences. In

addition, society itself is something apparently separate from the individuals other than in offering unexamined choices, although society is also to be the outcome, in principle, of individual choices. As such, the framework is unambiguously one of deriving the social from the individual, and there is no feedback in the other direction. As Sen (1995, p. 3) simply but devastatingly puts it:

Another issue, related to individual behavior and rationality, concerns the role of social interactions in the development of values, and also the connection between value formation and the decision-making processes. Social choice theory has tended to avoid this issue.

One way of interpreting Sen's subsequent work is as a process both of rendering social choice theory more specific or concrete as well as more general in its scope. As Sen (1999b, p. 350) suggests:

Also, some investigations, while not directly a part of social theory, have been helped by the understanding generated by the study of group decisions (such as the causation and prevention of famines and hunger, or the forms and consequences of gender inequality, or the demands of individual freedom seen as a "social commitment"). The reach and relevance of social choice theory can be very extensive indeed.

Inequality is the next step and an exemplary illustration. Alternative states of the world are reduced to numerical distributions of income. On the other hand, ethical considerations can be introduced over and above the general if not universally valid claim that more is better.¹³ Ranking of different income distributions, or measures of inequality, follow immediately according to how a person's own changes in income are quantified and how one person's income is measured against one another.

In a widely cited resolution of the first problem, Atkinson (1970) suggests the use of a parameter ϵ to measure inequality aversion. This is, in fact, slightly misleading because inequality is not addressed directly by the parameter ϵ as it pertains only to changes in income for a single person. It is attached to a measurement of inequality only by adding up ϵ -adjusted incomes across individuals. Essentially, to gain a measure of inequality, it is necessary to make interpersonal comparisons. The basis on which Atkinson implicitly does this is to treat all individuals equally subject to transformed incomes. As I have shown, Fine (1985), rather than thereby setting the parameters of interpersonal comparison, b_i all equal to unity and varying ϵ ,¹⁴ a more general approach is to allow the b_i to vary as well. Further, there is a neat duality between the role of ϵ and of the b_i . For, if instead of fixing the b_i at unity and varying ϵ to measure inequality, it is possible to fix ϵ and to vary the parameters b_i . Raising the b_i for those on lower income represents a greater bias against inequality. As a result, I show that varying ϵ and varying the b_i are essentially equivalent to one another from a formal point of view. The less you rank more income for an individual, the more you favour the poor against the rich in interpersonal comparisons and vice-versa.

This is hardly a surprising result but, in retrospect, has significance for clarifying, if it were needed, the pure formalism of the inequality literature and its extreme limitations. For, whilst the two approaches to inequality are mathematically

equivalent (as the problem is set up in terms of adding up over adjusted incomes), they are far from ethically equivalent. Comparison of incomes between people is entirely different from comparisons of incomes for a single person. Further, the ethics can only be engaged meaningfully at some level of detail concerning the nature of the people and the uses to which income can be put. For Sen (1995, p. 8):

To try to make social welfare judgements without using any interpersonal comparison of utilities, and without using any nonutility information, is not a fruitful enterprise.

Assigning more or less income to a single person, or taking from one and giving to another, makes no more sense than giving them bigger or lower numbers. Is it a matter of attaining subsistence or yielding to indulgence, for example? By the same token, making interpersonal comparisons depends upon the nature of the people (as well as what can be achieved with the income). Sen is particularly hot on this, cleverly teasing us over whether capacity for pleasure, disability, and so on should count for or against us as far as income is concerned.

It is crudely possible to see Sen's turn to famine in these terms. Food and the starving are both highly specific. Yet, a much more important step is also taken, from the (formal) ethical to the causal. Sen counterposes the entitlement approach, EA, to supply-side explanations, food availability decline, FAD. Two features stand out from EA, not least in marking continuities with previous work. First, the formal analytics of EA are, at core, derived from standard set-theoretic microeconomics within mainstream general equilibrium theory, with some generalisation through access to non-market-related entitlements. What can I get from what I have, given the conditions for transforming one to the other? Second, as is immediately apparent from the previous sentence, the analytics of EA are not food-specific. They could apply equally to any basic need and even to luxuries.

This is not to suggest that EA, as deployed, is purely micro-based, and never macro, and fails to be food-specific. As Sen (1999a, p. 170) argues, famine is dependent upon "the exercise of power and authority ... the alienation of the rulers from those ruled ... the social and political distance between the governors and the governed". Such considerations, however, tend to enter separately from the microanalytics of entitlements. Macro reference to food and famine arises directly out of empirical work in applying the approach. They also enter more obliquely through the incorporation of social relations, structures and processes. For they are superimposed, not built, upon the micro-foundations. An obvious example is by appeal to a class of landless labourers. Unable to produce for own consumption or to command sufficient (wage) revenue or payment in kind to gain sustenance, they are potentially subject to famine irrespective of overall aggregate supply of food (although if not subject to FAD, this has to be placed elsewhere). Yet, such arguments pre-suppose social relations on the land, between landlords and labourers, and in the distribution of food. None of these is reducible to EA.

My own assessment of EA, and the debate it has inspired, was motivated tangentially as far as famine is concerned, Fine (1997a). I had undertaken a research project on the determinants of the UK diet as part of an ESRC research programme designed to understand the persistence of unhealthy eating patterns, Fine et al (1996),

Fine (1998) and Murcott (ed) (1998). My food research, however, followed on from a broader study of the determinants of consumption.¹⁵ The organising theme was to hypothesise that commodities serving consumption are attached to distinct, integral “systems of provision” – structurally integrated along the chain of activities from production to consumption itself, as in the clothing, energy and food systems, for example, Fine and Leopold (1993). In addition to its own specificity, as a system of provision, the food system is unique in bearing a pervasive “organic” content by virtue of its dependence at the outset upon land and its ultimate journey’s end in ingestion. Not surprisingly, then, I should be acutely sensitive to the limited extent to which EA had in theoretical principle, if less guilty in empirical practice, addressed the specificity of food and of food systems as the latter vary by crop, time and place. In a nutshell, not surprisingly given its transparent conceptual and technical origins in the mainstream microeconomics of feasibility sets, EA is profoundly neutral with respect to underlying social relations and historical specificity (except in defining endowments and their potential transformation into outcomes).

At this time, I was also already heavily concerned with developments in or, more exactly, around economics. In brief, I have been arguing that economics has been colonising the other social sciences as never before.¹⁶ This is a consequence of its new micro-foundations in which informational imperfections and asymmetries are to the fore. On this basis, economics purports to explain the economic and the non-economic as the rational, path-dependent response to market imperfections. This includes economic and social structures, institutions, customs, culture and so on. Previously, in the older form of “economics imperialism”, the non-market was addressed as if it were akin to a perfect market, most notably in the work of Gary Becker. Now there is a corresponding reductionism of the economic and the social to market, especially, informational imperfections. It has given rise to a whole set of “new” fields within economics – the new microfoundations of macroeconomics, the new trade theory, the new financial, the new development, the new institutional, the new labour economics – as well as new fields outside economics or influence upon the old – the new political economy, economic geography, economic sociology, and so on. I have parodied such initiatives by the formula $ss=e=mi^2$. First all economics is reduced to market imperfections, mi , and methodological individualism, mi , (in the form of imperfectly informed rational economic agents). Then, all social science is reduced to such economics.

Economics imperialism has a number of general features, although it is important to emphasise how diverse it is in content and depth according to the influence of continuing traditions of colonised discipline or topic. This is in part due to the informal incorporation of the results of the new microfoundations that both betrays and conceals their origins in the axiomatic technicalities of mainstream economics. Response to economics imperialism has been heavily conditioned by the extent to which rational choice approaches are already up and running and, more generally, by the way of handling, if at all, the relationship between micro and macro factors. For the new economics, macro is the product of micro although it feeds back upon it, giving the impression of dealing with the social.

These perspectives informed my assessment of EA. In particular, I noted the unresolved tension in Sen’s own work – between the microfoundations of the entitlement analytics and the broader recognition of famine as irreducibly macro, not

least because famine is more than the sum of its individual parts – hardly personal starvation for the many. Is famine the choice to starve by self or other on your behalf, a replicated but rational response to market imperfections? Sufficient humanity seems to have prevailed to prevent such a logical conclusion from emerging from within the literature. Contrast can, however, be drawn with the civil war literature, for example, in which war (and genocide) is politics by other means, but politics is economics as market imperfections (ethnic communication and cooperation difficulties) by other means.¹⁷

Sen himself commendably refrains from attaching his theory of entitlement failure to the new microfoundations despite his microanalytics – and emphasis on the informational role to be played by a free press. Nor have I come across any sympathy for the approach in any of his work, hardly surprising in view of his uncompromising stance on “rationality”, Sen (1977). When he addresses the macro, it is almost from a perspective independent of the micro – as in the role of the free press and democracy in guarding against famine, although classes are at times perceived to have entitlements. Further, I argued that the same micro-macro tension is to be found in EA debate. Those adopting a critical stance towards EA have not so much been engaging with it as an alternative to FAD as questioning whether their macro-interpretations of famine had been or could be accommodated within EA – issues of the nature of property, violence, and culture and custom.

This is an appropriate point to move on with Sen to well being, capabilities, development and freedom, with Sen (1985) as a stepping stone. But this represents more than a generalisation and concretisation of what has come before, as in the shift from inequality to famine – first grub, then clothing, housing, education ... and finally ethics, on which see below? For, in the light of economics imperialism, there are other tensions than those attached to micro-macro. The marginalist revolution is recognised to have taken the social out of economics in two senses. It represented a shift to methodological individualism and the construction of the non-market as separate from the market, with the former taken as exogenous and to be explained by others, so that the latter could constitute a distinct object of study. The new information-theoretic economics brings the social back in according to its own image of optimisation subject to informational constraints. Similarly, the path followed by mainstream economics initially separates out material and cultural analyses and sets the latter aside. Yet, once again in its own inimitable style, the current phase of economics imperialism is reintroducing the cultural (trust, customs, norms, etc) as an informational calculus.¹⁸

Although Sen’s work too has increasingly embraced the social and the cultural, there is no evidence that he has been seduced by the unsubtle charms of economics imperialism. Indeed, if anything, there is a shift, at least discursively, away from the micro-analytic technicalities of EA. The point was established in the context of famine and can, subsequently, float freely to serve intermediate or macro levels of analysis across capabilities more generally. In short, Sen (1999a, p. xii) sees a “deep complementarity between individual freedom and social arrangements”. As in EA debate, the response has been to question whether the macro, the social and the cultural have been or can be appropriately or sufficiently addressed. For Rosenbaum (1999), in making interpersonal comparisons, Sen’s understanding of preferences and goods is insufficiently cultural in failing to take account of meanings, although

essentially his own approach is merely to add the symbolic or whatever as a dimension in the vector of characteristics of what is consumed.¹⁹ Gasper and Cameron (2000) introduce a selection that explicitly seeks to assess in order to extend Sen's work. Gasper (2000), under the rubric of freedoms, achievements and meanings, questions, "whether to have more options is valuable depends on the meaning the options have for the actor and her audience", p. 999. Giri (2000) is concerned with well being as involving mental self-development and personal transformation towards sharing with others, Cameron (2000) with Sen's neglect of opulence or upper end of capabilities, and Carmen (2000) with "capacitation".

These contributions all question whether Sen has been sufficiently general in addressing the material, the social and the cultural as well as the economic and ethical. But, again, he can also be charged with being too general. As I have argued in a different context, that of the welfare regime approach to the welfare state, by extension of the earlier argument around the specificity of food (and other basic needs), it is essential to attach public as well as private contributions to capabilities to specific systems of provision, Fine (2000b). How is each of health, education, housing and welfare differentially created, distributed and used, as well as interactive with corresponding cultures, ideologies and political practices. This leads to consideration of three different types of valid interpretation of Brecht's dictum, "first grub [or whatever], then ethics",²⁰ cutting across priorities, epistemology and ontology. First, you have to eat in order to be able to engage in the luxury of ethics (as unwittingly revealed by Marie Antoinette); second, each way of providing food generates its own corresponding ethics (from vegetarianism to cannibalism);²¹ and, third, the nature of ethics depends upon the nature of food and eating (you are what and how you eat as in conviviality, national cuisines, and the Sunday roast).²² Whether for food or other capabilities, Sen's analysis does not appear to be able to engage across each of these issues at the level of generality at which he operates. In arguing, controversially, that famine is liable to be avoided by the presence of a free press and democracy, what exactly is the analytical content of such an observation? Is it specific to food, or does the same apply to housing and education (and excessive mortality of female children)? What are the mechanisms through which the free press and democracy work (or not)? Are they the same or different across different capabilities, entitlements and freedoms? My presumption is that they are different both for the nature, forms, levels and incidence of provision and their mode of functioning; and much the same applies to the contentious notions of free press and democracy themselves.

I am not only concerned with the justice of these criticisms and whether they are valid as such, in principle or in emphasis. Rather, my point is to note how Sen tends to induce criticism in the form of requiring extension, and not rejection, of his analysis. Slightly different reservations, however, over his over-generalisation apply to Sen's macro/social/material/cultural analyses. In particular, he fails, for example, to draw a careful distinction between "the" market and capitalism. Indeed, he seems to use the two interchangeably if not arbitrarily so. His lack of careful definition does allow him to establish very important points. First, for him, being generically against the markets is as odd as being against conversation, Sen (1999a, p. 6), not least because there are two arguments in favour of the market, p. 26. For, "the efficiency contributions of the market mechanism can hardly be doubted", p. 143, and the market also constitutes a valuable freedom in its own right. Support is garnered from

Marx in his favouring capitalism against slavery, and for his being against child labour, p. 29/30. And there is frequent reference to the importance of the creation of labour markets in opening up freedoms. Further, capitalism is correctly seen as widening the realm of ethics, not narrowing it down to greed, for “the efficient working of the capitalist economy is, in fact, dependent on powerful systems of values and norms”, p. 262. This is obvious from reflection on daily and mundane experiences of capitalism, where we are so bombarded with dos and don'ts on the basis of moral, cultural and legal imperatives that we have become dulled to their presence. Note, however, that the information-theoretic version of economics imperialism would heartily agree; values and norms are rational, path-dependent, potentially but not necessarily efficient, responses to market, especially informational, imperfections. Much more important, though, is the extent to which the cash nexus tends to establish in principle, if not always in practice, the subordination of the ethical to the economic, to change the nature of entitlements, for example, and the way in which they are conceived. This has been powerfully argued by Radin (1996) against the economics imperialism of Becker and its associated universal commodification – treat everything as if they could be commodities. This is not a route taken by Sen but it points to the need both to distinguish carefully between the nature of entitlements, capabilities and freedoms and the means by which they are delivered, and how the two are related

In this light, Sen's arguments about “the market” are casual at best, and inconsistent at worst, not least because it is inadequate or, more exactly, inappropriate to understand (market) exchange as a form of (conversational) communication. The market communicates substance and is not simply a system of signs. Polemically, if not necessarily intended by Sen, not to be against the market is coded language for being in favour of capitalism. Leaving this aside, it is not simply that the market has proven the most powerful support to child labour and slavery, for example, (as well as its most powerful opponent) or that the virtues of the market and capitalism appear better in looking backwards than in looking forwards in developmental terms. Rather, as argued by Fine and Lapavitsas (2000) in debate with Zelizer (2000) over the content and meaning of commodities and money, the market is too general and diverse a category from which to unravel both the ethical and material content of socio-economics systems. As Slater and Tonkiss (2001, p. 3) put it:²³

It is not, then, a question of being “for” or “against” markets as such. Our argument is that markets are not simply good or bad, because they are highly variable ... Put baldly, the market is both less good and less bad than is often claimed, because it is a less definite thing than we might think.

This is because of the different underlying relations that the market expresses. Further, the nature of capital and capitalism is an appropriate starting point both in understanding the latter's diversity as well as those non-capitalist activities that partially adopt the market forms associated with capitalism.

While the latter conclusion is highly controversial, the need to disentangle the nature of the commodity from other social forms is not, at least as far as an extensive literature in anthropology is concerned, covering the distinction between the commodity and the gift. A classic statement is provided by Gregory (1982). More recently, Gregory (1997) has complemented his analysis of the gift/commodity

distinction with that of “goods”, objects that are not exchanged at all. Whilst the use of the triplet as the basis on which to reconstruct all societies is questionable, his work is notable for emphasising the differences in the nature of the values that can be attached to each form. Entitlements, capabilities and freedoms are different in nature according to how they are provided. They cannot be appropriately taken as a formal and general analytical starting point.²⁴ Sen’s easy, if increasingly refined, movement between market, commodities, entitlements, capabilities, and so on reflects an insensitivity to the issues associated with the nature and meaning of different social relations, and especially those attached to capitalism as opposed to the other market forms that he so readily bundles up together (as alternative routes to otherwise undifferentiated capabilities and freedoms).

In short, the legacy of social choice theory that continues to mark Sen’s subsequent work has a number of drawbacks that seem irresolvable. First is the tension between micro and macro or individual and social. Second is analytical overgenerality despite increasing attention to more concrete or specific issues. Third is the failure to root and construct the meaning of categories in their social and historical context. Fourth is lack of analytical precision in ranging over the market, commodities, capabilities, entitlements and the like. Fifth, that these are issues within Sen’s work both denotes his break with mainstream economics (for which they are either meaningless or reducible to path dependence or whatever) and a limited incorporation of the concerns and contributions of other social sciences and, it should be added, radical political economy.

3. What Legacy?

In other words, I suspect that, ultimately, Sen’s failure to subscribe to, let alone elaborate, a political economy of capitalism is the major source of unease felt towards him on the part of political economists. This is despite his transparent rejection of mainstream economics and many of its methodological underpinnings, and a continuing distance from the new, let alone the old, micro-foundations. To self-parody, whilst a capabilities response to globalisation is certainly feasible - as is one to sustainability, Sen (2000) – it is not liable to generate a stance on the endogeneity of money or on transformation problem and the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, for the benefit of post-Keynesians and Marxists, respectively.

Nonetheless, as outlined above, albeit through an entirely different trajectory, Sen has followed and even been in advance of what I take to be the present trends in scholarship across the social sciences.²⁵ These are, first, a retreat from the excesses of neo-liberalism and its posing every issue in terms of market versus the state. Second is the retreat from the excesses of postmodernism and the wish to connect the social construction of meaning with its material foundations (the grub/ethics conundrum writ large).²⁶ Third is the move from at most a nominal commitment to a genuine practice of interdisciplinary scholarship. Fourth, there is the need to negotiate each of these elements without falling foul of economics imperialism, with its gargantuan but reductionist appetite. As a special case of the latter, the new development economics, especially in the form of the post-Washington consensus, is particularly irksome.²⁷ I am disturbed that Sen (1999a, p. 126) has warmly welcomed the Comprehensive Development Framework of the World Bank for its breadth of vision, without

apparently recognising how it is the social complement of the economics of the post-Washington consensus, not least in leaving its economic prognoses unchallenged. This is as much a strategic as an intellectual issue, as the post-Washington consensus seeks to gain rhetorical and scholarly legitimacy and hegemony over development studies, with corresponding practice in terms of policy lagging far behind as evident from resignations by both Stiglitz and Kanbur, Wade (2001) for an account. It will be a salutary lesson to see how Sen responds to the inevitable appropriation and reduction of his rich analyses to the information-theoretic approach.

In short, as argued elsewhere, the coming period of scholarship is liable to debate what sort of economics is appropriate for the social sciences in view of the challenges raised in the previous paragraph. Such a debate about the economy will not take place within economics itself, as it becomes increasingly esoteric, technically and methodologically self-isolating, and intolerant of alternatives in method and theory. In this light, I emphasise the positive contribution made by Sen from the perspective of political economy. He has not been captured by economics imperialism and, unlike its practitioners, he opens and is open to debate across key issues. The contrast with mainstream economics is sharp, where the language let alone the ideas necessary for a genuine political economy of capitalism are precluded by its reductionism. Ultimately, the nature and extent of Sen's lasting contribution will depend upon taking his work forward critically rather than allowing it to be captured and transformed by the dismal science. Political economy may not always be able to stand on Sen's shoulders in the coming period, but he certainly provides many weapons in addressing the social, the macro, the material and the cultural in the intellectual battles that lie ahead in defining the "economic" for social science.

Footnotes

*This paper was written whilst in receipt of a Research Fellowship from the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) under award number R000271046 to study The New Revolution in Economics and Its Impact upon Social Sciences. Thanks to those who made comments on an earlier version.

¹ To be mischievous, these do not accommodate the book that displays a picture of Sen on its cover but proceeds as follows, Jhunjhunwalla (2000, p. 13):

Sen's thinking [is] ahistorical ... Sen's vision is that of a healthy, educated and perpetually poor people of the developing countries slogging for the MNCs of the West. This is not to say that Sen is evil. He most probably is not. Rather he is a well meaning person who was deeply moved by deprivation that he saw in his early years, but he has gone astray in bad company. Thus, he cannot be excused. No wonder that the Nobel Prize was awarded to Sen. He upholds the economic interests of the industrial countries better than they could perhaps do for themselves.

² While I was still at Birkbeck at the end of the 1980s, to my astonishment, I was formally invited to submit a suggestion for the Nobel Prize. I suspect that this was because a colleague, Denis Snower, was a co-author with the Chair of the Nobel Committee for economics, Assar Lindbeck. I presume that my nomination of Sen can only have delayed his award! For an account of the basis for awarding the prize, see Lindbeck (2000).

³ As suggested by Akerlof (1990, p. 73) in commenting on Becker-type analysis, referencing the jibe made at Friedman by Paul Samuelson - that he learnt how to spell "banana" but did not know where to stop. More exactly, they surely do not know where to start! Note that Becker (1996, pp. 16-18) rejects Sen's notion of a distinction between ethical and personal preferences on the grounds that the one is reducible to the other. For more discussion, see Fine (2001a, Chapter 3) but, in the wider context, especially Walsh (2000). Note also, with explicit reference to economic imperialism, that one criterion for the Nobel Prize is interdisciplinary research, for which Becker is cited, Lindbeck (2000). This is equivalent to granting Friedman a prize for his contribution to freedom.

⁴ As Cameron (2000, p. 1033) comments in one of a number of penetrating insights, although I would not put it in these terms:

Sen's epistemological choices appear eclectic and do set limitations to the acceptability by mainstream economists of his contributions to debates on the economics of inequality. But Sen still looks over his epistemological shoulder for intellectual acceptance by mainstream economists, which sets limits to the distance he can take from logical positivism.

⁵ Eight of the Nobel Prizes in Economics over forty years have gone to Chicago, admittedly one to James Tobin, twice as many as to any other institution. Esping-Andersen (2000, p. 61) puts it very well, if apparently unaware of the new micro-foundations:

Economics would crash if there were no free choice. Paradoxically, economists espouse a theory that is profoundly monopolistic. Respectable economists are condemned to do their shopping in an academic equivalent to the Soviet *komsomol* store: choice is restricted to one brand only of the same basic ware ... As the joke goes, the definition of an economist is someone with a PhD in laissez-faire ideology.

For evidence of the monopoly of the mainstream, see Coats (ed) (1996), Hodgson and Rothman (1999), Bernstein (1999), Siegfried and Stock (1999), and Lee and Harley (1998), for example.

⁶ I take the special section of Journal of International Development, vol 12, no 7, edited by Cameron and Gasper, as indicative of progressive commentary upon Sen, especially in the context of development. Note that I do not comment upon Sen's treatment of gender nor his use of game theory. For a broader overview and list of Sen's major works, see Pressman and Summerfield (2000).

⁷ My then comparative advantage in mathematics would no longer prevail in economics today. Such skills are no longer in short supply within the profession, in part inducing both initiates and the established to seek new areas of application for their techniques, both to relieve monotony and to gain publication outlets. This is relevant to the later discussion of economics imperialism.

⁸ Murakami (1968) had, however, got there first.

⁹ The topic now has its own specialist journal, Social Choice and Welfare.

¹⁰ This can be termed the problem of ordinality as opposed to the cardinality required for interpersonal comparison.

¹¹ In my own work, for example, I have examined the implications of finite perception and multiple criteria for the structure of choice, Fine (1995).

¹² Nonetheless, it suffices in part for Sen (1987) to argue that economics does and should make, and argue over, ethical judgements in contrast to traditional welfare economics.

¹³ Rawls' maximin criteria only allows those not on the minimum to have more if this in no way impedes raising the income of those on the minimum. But note that it is possible to prefer less for all if there is a more equal distribution of income. Sen also questions the Pareto criterion when it clashes with libertarianism.

¹⁴ Choice of the parameters b_i to represent interpersonal comparisons sustains the analogy with Sen's notation for exactly the same problem within social choice theory. See Sen (1995, pp. 8/9) and Fine (1996) for explicit formal treatment of analogy between social choice and measurement of inequality.

¹⁵ This work also dealt in the theory and measurement of social (consumption) norms by drawing upon the analysis of social choice theory.

¹⁶ See Fine (1997b) for earliest contribution in this vein, and Fine (2001a and b) for more recent assessments and reference to the literature. For evidence from the mainstream itself, see Becker (1990) and Lazear (2000), both of whom refer to economic imperialism and Olson and Kähkönen (2000) who prefer the telling metaphor of economics as metropolis and other social science as the suburbs. See also Frey (1999) who attracts praise from Nobel Laureates Becker, Stigler and Buchanan.

¹⁷ See Collier and Hoeffler (1998) and Cramer (2000) for a critique.

¹⁸ Hence the failure to understand information properly – its nature and where it comes from, quite apart from how it is distinct from knowledge. At best we are given a crude distinction between risk and uncertainty, what is knowable and what is not.

¹⁹ For the weakness of this relative to available literature, and an alternative, see Fine (2000a). In any case, Rosenbaum neglects Sen's work on (the impossibility of) Paretian liberals. As I have shown, this can be interpreted in terms of equilibria of interdependent preferences and/or as prisoners' dilemma of interdependent choice, Fine (1975). More generally, Sen is deeply concerned with the nature and meaning of ethical values.

²⁰ Cited by Sen (1989, p. 769) who essentially only uses the first interpretation to follow – in order to argue the importance of reverse priority and causality as well.

²¹ See Lestrangan's (1997) explicit reference to Brecht in these terms.

²² Consider Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach not only as a moral imperative but also as a way of inducing philosophers to understand the world in a different way and through different practices. Such praxis is the target of Carmen's (2000) *prima mangiare, poi filosofare*.

²³ More specifically, p. 17:

There must be few people in the world unable to draw a straight conceptual line from their local McDonald's to the huge multinational empire that owns it, if not beyond that to rainforests, global warming and global inequalities. On the other hand, these lines of sight may well be quite obscured: it took massive publicity campaigns to begin building understanding of Nike's participation in the market for street style and Nike as a massive recruiter of sweated labour from the Third World.

²⁴ The same applies to the gift/commodity dichotomy given the heterogeneity covered by each. This is not to deny the heuristic value of this and Sen's approach.

²⁵ See Fine (2001a) for discussion in the specific context of the latest *wunder* concept, social capital.

²⁶ In these terms, I have sought to make order out of the cluttered and chaotic literature on consumption across the social sciences, Fine (2000a).

²⁷ For a critique, see Fine et al (eds) (2001).

References

- Akerlof, G. (1990) "George A. Akerlof", in Swedberg (ed) (1990).
- Atkinson, A. (1970) "On the Measurement of Inequality", Journal of Economic Theory, vol 2, no 3, pp. 244-63.
- Becker, G. (1990) "Gary S. Becker", in Swedberg (ed) (1990).
- Becker, G. (1996) Accounting for Tastes, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Becker, G. and G. Becker (1996) The Economics of Life, New York: McGraw Hill.
- Bernstein, M. (1999) "Economic Knowledge, Professional Authority, and the State: The Case of American Economics during and after World War II", in Garnett (ed) (1999).
- Cameron, J. (2000) "Amartya Sen on Economic Inequality: The Need for an Explicit Critique of Opulence", Journal of International Development, vol 12, no 7, pp. 1031-45.
- Cameron, J. and D. Gasper (eds) (2000) "Amartya Sen on Inequality, Human Well-Being, and Development as Freedom", Journal of International Development, vol 12, no 7.
- Carmen, R. (2000) "Prima Mangiare, Poi Filosofare", Journal of International Development, vol 12, no 7, pp. 1019-30.
- Coats, A. (ed) (1996) The Post-1945 Internationalization of Economics, History of Political Economy, vol 28, Supplement, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Collier, P. and A. Hoeffler (1998) "On Economic Causes of Civil War", Oxford Economic Papers, vol 50, no 4, pp. 563-73.
- Cramer, C. (2000) "War, Famine and the Limits of Economics", Paper Presented at Conference on Local and Global Dimensions of Food Security, The International Famine Centre, Cork, Ireland, April 13-15th, 2000.
- Esping-Andersen, G. (2000) "Two Societies, One Sociology, and No Theory", British Journal of Sociology, vol 51, no 1, pp. 59-77.
- Fine, B. (1975) "Individual Liberalism in a Paretian Society", Journal of Political Economy, vol 83, no 6, pp. 82-96.
- Fine, B. (1985) "A Note on the Measurement of Inequality and Interpersonal Comparison", Social Choice and Welfare, vol 1, no 4, pp 273-75.
- Fine, B. (1995) "On the Relationship between True Preference and Actual Choice", Social Choice and Welfare, vol 12, no 4, pp. 353-61.

Fine, B. (1996) "Reconciling Interpersonal Comparability and the Intensity of Preference for the Utility Sum Rule", Social Choice and Welfare, no 13, no 3, pp. 319-25.

Fine, B. (1997a) "Entitlement Failure?", Development and Change, vol 28, no 4, pp. 617-47.

Fine, B. (1997b) "The New Revolution in Economics", Capital and Class, no 61, Spring, pp. 143-48.

Fine, B. (1998) The Political Economy of Diet, Health and Food Policy, London: Routledge.

Fine, B. (2000a) "The Cluttered Landscape of Consumption: An Economist's Gaze", mimeo.

Fine, B. (2000b) "Globalisation in Light of the Political Economy of Finance and the Political Economy of the Welfare State", paper presented to METU Annual Economics Conference, Ankara, September.

Fine, B. (2001a) Social Capital versus Social Theory: Political Economy and Social Science at the Turn of the Millennium, London: Routledge.

Fine, B. (2001b) "Economic Imperialism as Kuhnian Revolution", International Papers in Political Economy, forthcoming.

Fine, B. and K. Fine (1974a and b) "Social Choice and Individual Ranking", Parts I and II, Review of Economic Studies, vol 41, no 3, pp. 303-22 and no 4, pp. 459-75.

Fine, B. and C. Lapavistas (2000) "Markets and Money in Social Theory: What Role for Economics?", Economic and Society, vol 29, no 3, pp. 357-82.

Fine, B. and E. Leopold (1993) The World of Consumption, London: Routledge.

Fine, B. et al (1996) Consumption in the Age of Affluence: The World of Food, London: Routledge.

Fine, B. et al (eds) (2001) Development Policy in the Twenty-First Century: Beyond the Post-Washington Consensus, London: Routledge.

Frey, B. (1999) Economics as a Science of Human Behaviour: Towards a New Social Science Paradigm, extended second edition of that of 1992, Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Friedman, M. and R. Friedman (1980) Free to Choose: A Personal Statement, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Garnett, R. (ed) (1999) What Do Economists Know?: New Economics of Knowledge, London: Routledge.

Gasper, D. (2000) "Development as Freedom: Taking Economics beyond Commodities – the Cautious Boldness of Amartya Sen", Journal of International Development, vol 12, no 7, pp. 989-1001.

Gasper, D. and J. Cameron (2000) "Introduction: Assessing and Extending the Work of Amartya Sen", Journal of International Development, vol 12, no 7, pp. 985-88.

Giri, A. (2000) "Rethinking Human Well-Being: A Dialogue with Amartya Sen", Journal of International Development, vol 12, no 7, pp. 1003-18.

Gregory, C. (1982) Gifts and Commodities, London: Academic Press.

Gregory, C. (1997) Savage Money: The Anthropology and Politics of Commodity Exchange, Amsterdam: Harwood Academic.

Hodgson, G. and H. Rothman (1999) "The Editors and Authors of Economics Journals: A Case of Institutional Oligopoly?", Economic Journal, vol 109, no 453, pp. F165-86.

Jhunjhunwalla, B. (2000) Welfare State and Globalization: A Critique of Amartya Sen, Jaipur: Rawat Publications.

Lazear, E. (2000) "Economic Imperialism", Quarterly Journal of Economics, vol 115, no 1, pp. 99-146.

Lee, F. and S. Harley (1998) "Peer Review, the Research Assessment Exercise and the Demise of Non-Mainstream Economics", Capital and Class, no 66, pp. 23-51.

Lestringant, F. (1997) Cannibals: The Discovery and Representation of the Cannibal from Columbus to Jules Verne, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Lindbeck, A. (2000) "The Sveriges Riksbank (Bank of Sweden) Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel, 1969-1998", www.nobel.se/economics/articles/lindbeck/index.html

Murakami, Y. (1968) Logic and Social Choice, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Murcott, A. (ed) (1998) The Nation's Diet: The Social Science of Food Choice, London: Longmans.

Olson, M. and S. Kähkönen (2000) "Introduction: The Broader View", in Olson and Kähkönen (eds) (2000).

Olson, M. and S. Kähkönen (eds) (2000) A Not-So-Dismal Science: A Broader View of Economies and Societies, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pressman, S. and G. Summerfield (2000) "The Economic Contributions of Amartya Sen", Review of Political Economy, vol 12, no1, pp.89-114.

- Radin, M. (1996) Contested Commodities, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Rosenbaum, E. (1999) "Against Naïve Materialism: Culture, Consumption and the Causes of Inequality", Cambridge Journal of Economics, vol 23, no 3, pp. 317-36.
- Sen, A. (1970) Collective Choice and Social Welfare, San Francisco: Holden-Day.
- Sen, A. (1977) "Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioral Foundations of Economic Theory", Philosophy and Public Affairs, vol 6, no 4, pp. 317-44, reprinted in Sen (1982).
- Sen, A. (1982) Choice, Welfare and Measurement, Blackwell: Oxford.
- Sen, A. (1985) Commodities and Capabilities, Amsterdam: North-Holland.
- Sen, A. (1987) On Ethics and Economics, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Sen, A. (1989) "Food and Freedom", World Development, vol 17, no 6, pp. 769-81.
- Sen, A. (1995) "Rationality and Social Choice", American Economic Review, vol 85, no 1, pp. 1-24.
- Sen, A. (1999a) Development as Freedom, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sen, A. (1999b) "The Possibility of Social Choice", American Economic Review, vol 89, no 3, pp. 349-78.
- Sen, A. (2000) "The Ends and Means of Sustainability", Keynote Address at Inter Academy Panel on International Issues, Tokyo, May.
- Siegfried, J. and W. Stock (1999) "The Labor Market for New Ph.D. Economists", with comments from R. Ehrenberg, Journal of Economic Perspectives, vol 13, no 3, pp. 115-34.
- Slater, D. and F. Tonkiss (2001) Market Society: Markets and Modern Social Theory, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Swedberg, R. (ed) (1990) Economics and Sociology, Redefining Their Boundaries: Conversations with Economists and Sociologists, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Wade, R. (2001) "Showdown at the World Bank", New Left Review, no 7, pp.124-137.
- Walsh, V. (2000) "Smith after Sen", Review of Political Economy, vol 12, no1, pp. 5-25.
- Zelizer, V. (2000) "Fine-Tuning the Zelizer View", Economy and Society, vol 29, no 3, pp. 383-89.