



Towards a Capability-Oriented Eco-Social Policy: Elements of a Normative Framework

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In this article we explore the potential of the capability approach as a normative basis for eco-social policies. While the capability approach is often interpreted as a productivist or maximalist perspective, assuming the desirability of economic growth, we suggest another understanding, which explicitly problematises the suitability of economic growth and productive employment as means for enhancing capabilities. We argue that the capability approach allows rejecting the identification of social progress with economic growth and that it calls for democratically debating the meaning of wellbeing and quality of life. We analyse the implications of this conceptualisation for the design of welfare states.

Keywords: Capability approach, eco-social policies, post-productivism, welfare reform.

Introduction

Contemporary welfare states are confronted with the challenge of ecological emergency. From their onset, the financial viability of welfare states has been to a large extent premised on economic growth, thus reinforcing the postulate that a successful economy is necessarily a growing economy. More specifically, the distribution of social benefits and services relies on the ability of economic actors to fund them – employers and employees if the system is based on contributions, taxpayers if it relies on fiscal revenues. If the economy is not flourishing, then benefits should be reduced or made more conditional as the recent austerity turn following the 2008 economic crisis has evidenced. Thus, economic growth is presented as the prerequisite for the smooth operation of the welfare state: without economic growth, it is claimed, the welfare state has to retreat. The Keynesian virtuous circle between social expenditure and economic prosperity is based on this very logic and depends on the ability to maintain the pace of economic growth: in this logic, social expenses are virtuous insofar they contribute to maintain beneficiaries' purchasing power and support overall consumption levels. The social investment state, often presented as the panacea to contemporary welfare dilemmas in the literature, also relies on this logic: it is premised on a supply-side virtuous circle, where social policies are turned into educational policies aiming at increasing skills and qualifications so as to support overall competitiveness and feed economic growth. In both cases, economic

growth is presented as the necessary driver for the viability of (more or less generous) welfare states.

The present circumstances suggest that alternative views to this economic growth-led welfare state have to be designed. There is indeed a growing consensus that the economic growth model is reaching its limits, both in terms of environmental sustainability and intergenerational justice. To put it briefly, the pursuit of economic growth on the present terms risks depleting planetary resources, thus putting at risk environmental sustainability and the ability of future generations to enjoy a comparable level of production and consumption¹. It seems thus relevant to explore how to decouple the welfare state from economic growth. Our article follows this line of thought. The objective is not to promote a depressing view advocating that present and future generations should altogether give up excessively high standards of living and embrace lower living conditions. It is rather to question the present terms and centrality of economic growth and ask what kind of growth or rather flourishing we should pursue.

We are thus concerned with the relationship between social policy and society in the context of ecological emergency. We interrogate the kind of society that social policy contributes to promote and how social policy and public policy at large may provide the basis for a sustainable society. In particular, in this article we are interested in exploring the potential and pitfalls of the capability approach as a normative framework for an eco-social policy. The capability approach suggests that what should be grown or maximised is not economic wealth or GDP, but people's freedom to live a life they have reason to value. Our contention is that maximising people's capabilities is compatible with a conception of the welfare state that is decoupled from economic growth. We first present the capability approach as a post-utilitarian and post-resourcist framework and, building on our previous work, we argue that capability-enhancing social policies should refer to a multidimensional 'anthropological conception', conceiving beneficiaries as 'receivers', 'doers' and 'judges' (see Bonvin and Laruffa, 2018a). We then detail the implications of the eco-social challenge for social policies, with regard to each of these anthropological dimensions. The conclusion summarises the main teachings of the article.

The capability approach in a nutshell: promises and limits for sustainable welfare

In order to develop a normative theory of an eco-social welfare state decoupled from economic growth, we draw from Amartya Sen's capability approach, which emerged originally for rethinking development beyond GDP increase (Sen, 1985, 1987, 1999, 2004, 2009). Following this approach, rather than only promoting individuals' material wellbeing, public policies should focus on expanding people's capabilities, i.e. their real freedom to lead a valuable life. There are two main reasons for choosing the capability approach as a normative framework of reference for establishing an eco-social welfare state. The first advantage of the capability approach consists precisely in shifting the focus of public action away from strictly resourcist approaches relying on the redistribution of material resources and towards citizens' freedom to lead valuable lives. Indeed, while people's material standards of living are recognised as important for wellbeing, such material resources are not the whole story, as the capability approach requires taking into account conversion factors allowing people to convert the possession of resources into capabilities. This implies that the welfare state is not only a matter of cash or resource

redistribution, but also of supporting individuals and adapting the society and the economy in a capability-enhancing way. It suggests that an eco-social state is not a retreating state, where public action is strictly constrained by ecological boundaries and 'growth to the limits', but a state that is called to explore other avenues than simply cash redistribution while paying due attention to environmental sustainability.

The second advantage of the capability approach resides in the importance that it confers to freedom to choose and democracy. From this perspective, defining the priorities of sustainable public action should take into account people's aspirations and preferences, which in turn calls for a democratic deliberation between the individual holders of all such aspirations in order to define the objectives that should be collectively pursued. In other words, public action is a matter of collective choice rather than technocratic governance: also ordinary citizens – rather than only 'experts' – should participate in the formulation of eco-social welfare policies. The design of social policies is then to be envisaged as a democratic task calling for collaborative modes of policy-making. Our claim is that by advocating such an extension of the public policy field, in the twofold direction of including conversion factors and genuinely democratising governance, the capability approach paves the way for the design of an eco-social welfare policy.

Against this background, it is possible to argue that the capability approach requires public action to be informed by a multidimensional 'anthropology' (i.e. a vision of human beings), whereby the individuals targeted by a policy are conceived not only as 'receivers' of benefits and services but also as 'doers' and 'judges' (Bonvin and Laruffa, 2018a).

In particular, the *receiver dimension* emphasises that human beings are vulnerable and in need of financial or relational support. This can be provided via cash redistribution, education, healthcare or other social services. The need for support is certainly stronger in certain life phases (e.g. childhood, old age) and for certain people (e.g. people with disabilities, unemployed people, etc.), but the necessity to rely on others' support is a universal feature of the human condition (Garrau, 2018). This dimension explicitly underlines the centrality of material (re-)distribution via cash benefits or social services for public action.

The *doer dimension* insists that, beyond their shared vulnerability, human beings are also agents, i.e. people capable to act on their own and usefully contribute to society or the economy. Such capacity for agency or 'capability for work' (Bonvin, 2012) can deploy itself in a plurality of ways: via a job in the labour market, but also via education, civic commitments, taking care of one's family, associative activities, etc. In the capability perspective, this requires that people are allowed to exercise their *doer* dimension in ways that 'they have reason to value' to use Sen's recurrent formula (e.g. Sen, 1999); this also implies that their capacity for agency needs to be adequately supported via collective arrangements such as education, availability of childcare or eldercare, healthcare, etc., independently from their contribution to economic growth.

The *judge dimension* includes two main components. First, human beings are able to form their own preferences and aspirations about their life projects or professional careers, rather than adapt to dominant norms or expectations about how they should behave. Second, they should be allowed to voice these preferences and aspirations and make them count in the course of public discussion; in other words, they should be allowed to take part in the social construction of the society, the economy and the environment. This includes the ability to take part in collective deliberations and express one's disagreement with existing policies. The *judge* dimension thus requires that people are recognised as

having both a 'capacity to aspire' (Appadurai, 2004) and a 'capability for voice' (Bonvin and Farvaque, 2006; Bonvin, 2012). It opposes paternalistic or technocratic views of public action that dictate what people should prefer and how they should behave. Beyond individualist perceptions of human freedom, it also requires that people confront their views with each other in order to identify what they 'have reason to value' (Bonvin and Farvaque, 2005).

This anthropological conception calls for developing welfare policies that encompass all three dimensions and avoid trade-offs between them, by contrast with frequent practices in contemporary social policies (e.g. supporting the doer at the expenses of the receiver and the judge).

However, these advantages of the capability approach for the design of an eco-social welfare policy are not self-evident, as they can also be interpreted in line with the economic growth paradigm. Indeed, it is only recently that scholars have started addressing the question of sustainability from a capability perspective (e.g. Schlosberg, 2007; Burger and Christen, 2011; Rauschmayer and Lessmann, 2013; Hillerbrand, 2018). More specifically, we see two crucial challenges in using the capability approach as a normative framework of reference for eco-social policies. The first problem is that the value of freedom, which lies at the core of the capability approach, seems often in contradiction with the principle of sustainability. In particular, the freedom to enjoy a high level of consumption seems irreconcilable with the goal of addressing climate change. In the same vein, the more the climate emergency becomes pressing, the more it seems that not only individual freedom but also democracy may constitute an impediment to a rapid implementation of the needed policies. From this perspective, the capability approach – with its emphasis on individual freedom and democracy – may appear as inadequate to tackle the issue of sustainability.

The second problem is that in the literature on the capability approach – including Sen's own work – economic growth is generally considered in positive terms. Indeed, the main point of divergence with mainstream economics is that in the capability perspective economic growth is only a means rather than an end in itself – but economic growth still appears as a valuable means for promoting capabilities. Indeed, it could be argued that maximising capabilities, which is the key objective in the capability approach, has an economic cost and thus cannot be achieved without economic growth. This suggests that the capability approach may not be able to move beyond the economic growth paradigm and may even reinforce it, at least in some of its interpretations.

Yet, recent work suggests that economic growth – even of a 'green' kind – is barely compatible with the principle of sustainability (Hickel and Kallis, 2020). Moreover, to the extent that economic growth destroys the natural environment, it may be the case that not only future generations but also individuals today suffer from its negative consequences in terms of health and quality of life. Thus, it could be argued that economic growth is often more an obstacle than an enabling factor in the promotion of capabilities. Our claim is that the pillars of the capability approach as described above offer the tools to re-think growth and maximisation on different terms and propose a vision where capabilities can be maximised while respecting the environment and the prospects of future generations.

On this basis, we develop an argument for a 'post-productivist' (Fitzpatrick, 2004) understanding of the capability approach and elaborate on its implications for social policy and society. Our central question is: what kind of social policy can contribute both to the promotion of individuals' freedom to lead valuable lives and to the goal of

sustainability? The following sections develop this argument and its consequences for the 'receiver', 'doer' and 'judge' dimensions.

The receiver dimension and the challenge of preserving the material basis for sustainable welfare

As stated above, the receiver dimension requires that people in need of support have access to adequate income or services in order to help them overcome or cope with their vulnerability. The capability approach insists that this vulnerable condition is shared by all human beings, although to a varying extent. This goes against stigmatising views of welfare, where people supported are assessed as incompetent and unable to make their own living. By recognising the universality of the receiver dimension, the capability approach reinforces the legitimacy of public interventions in the field of welfare, whether they are provided in the form of cash redistribution or services. The capability approach suggests that there are basic capabilities that need to be supported by society in order to guarantee universal entitlement to such capabilities. The market by itself cannot secure such universal entitlements, and it therefore needs to be regulated by the state and complemented by welfare policies. An encompassing intervention, including cash redistribution, appropriate individual support and active shaping of societal, economic and environmental conditions, is needed to adequately tackle the receiver dimension. It is in this wide-ranging perspective that proposals like the universal basic income or universal basic services are to be examined, in terms of assessing to what extent the universal guarantee of a basic income (Van Parijs, 1995; Birnbaum, 2010) or the universal access to basic services (Coote and Percy, 2020), or a combination of both, can secure the enhancement of basic capabilities for all. It is thus reminded that income and services are means towards the end of enhancing capabilities and should be assessed against this yardstick.

With regard to the receiver dimension, the question is not only that of guaranteeing each person access to a minimal amount of resources permitting her to live a decent life. This aspect has always been a crucial concern in the capability approach, where the challenge is to find a (possibly universal) threshold of essential capabilities that human beings need to flourish (Nussbaum, 2000, 2011). In the capability approach, this threshold is presented as unconditional – that is, it cannot be questioned in case of insufficient economic growth. However, the point is also to problematise the control over too many resources, excessively high levels of consumption and too much richness, insofar such standards of living may threaten sustainable development both for the most vulnerable people of present societies and for future generations. The focus then is not only on the poverty and deprivation of those at the bottom but also on 'inequality', 'advantage' and on the 'extreme wealth' of those at the top – and these aspects are explicitly addressed by the recent literature on the capability approach (Burchardt and Hick, 2018; Robeyns, 2019). This problem obviously goes beyond the reach of welfare policies strictly speaking and it has concrete consequences in terms of the taxation of wealth and establishing a maximum level of consumption (e.g. limiting luxury goods). This is in line with recent proposals about 'sustainable consumption' and 'consumption corridors' (Fuchs *et al.*, 2021) with the aim to ensure that basic needs are met for present and future generations. This points to the relevance of developing a twofold reflection about establishing a minimal threshold of universally guaranteed basic capabilities (in the line of Rawls' maximin principle) and a

maximal threshold of resources and consumption, compatible with social justice and environmental sustainability in the short and long run (in the direction of what could be called a minimax principle, thus calling for the minimisation of maximum living standards).

One last crucial point concerning the receiver dimension relates to the importance of unconditional access to needed benefits and services, independently from economic growth. In this perspective selective mechanisms, excluding less deserving or motivated citizens from the benefits and services securing basic capabilities, are not acceptable. As empirical research has abundantly documented, such mechanisms are often resorted to in contexts of austerity as they seem to be legitimised by insufficient economic growth. They may have a twofold exclusionary impact by inciting welfare agents to exclude some vulnerable people from the benefits of welfare and by promoting a reduced sense of entitlement among beneficiaries who interpret their situation as resulting from their own fault and consequently 'choose', out of shame and guilt, not to take up benefits (Bonvin and Laruffa, 2018a). Thus, the coupling of welfare and economic growth results in selection of the most deserving by welfare agents and in self-exclusion by people in need of support themselves, who are pushed to interpret their vulnerability not as a universal human condition but as an individual fault.

To sum up, with respect to the receiver dimension, the capability approach emphasises that: a) income and social services are means toward the end of enhancing capabilities; b) universal access should be guaranteed against present trends in social policy towards strict conditionality; c) a democratic debate on lower and upper thresholds of material wellbeing (maximin and minimax) is needed.

The doer dimension: welfare as a means to recognise human agency in its plurality

Over the last decades there has been a shift in the role of social policy in society from 'de-commodification' and protecting people *from* the market to 'activation' and empowerment *for* the market. Amartya Sen's capability approach has been sometimes invoked in normatively justifying this shift towards active social policy. Indeed, the capability approach suggests seeing individuals not only as 'patients' but also as 'agents'. The problem is that this emphasis on the active subject often goes hand in hand with a rather narrow understanding of what it means to be an actor. In most instances, it is clearly the *economic* actor who has come to dominate the social policy agenda. In this sense, the capability approach has sometimes been interpreted in a way that entails a 'productivist' orientation, whereby the main goals of welfare states are to improve individuals' human capital (e.g. through education and health) and to include people in the labour market (e.g. through active labour market policies).

This understanding of the capability approach is most evident in the 'social investment' agenda (Morel *et al.*, 2012; Hemerijck, 2018). Indeed, social investment suggests to focus social policy on individuals' 'freedom to act' (Hemerijck, 2017: 12). Yet, this freedom is mainly framed in relation to paid work. To be sure, other spheres beyond employment are recognised as important in the social investment agenda and emphasis is also put on work/life balance policies that allow people to combine paid work with family responsibilities. However, also in such cases it seems that the main goal is that of allowing individuals to accommodate work imperatives within their lives and that, for instance, the

value of the time spent with one's family is subordinated to the value of employment (Saraceno, 2015).

Against this interpretation of the capability approach, we suggest a 'post-productivist' understanding of the doer dimension and elaborate on its implications for social policy. Following Fitzpatrick (2004: 218), we argue that 'post-productivism' entails that 'multiple forms of valuable activity, both formal and informal, are identified and nurtured'. We contend that the capability approach, while not denying the importance and relevance of employment, demands social policy to recognise and support other valuable activities beyond paid work (Laruffa, 2020). Of equal significance, the capability approach also calls for putting more emphasis on quality of work and employment. While actual social policies all too often consider that any job is a good job and focus on the increase of the employment rate (thus contributing to reinforce the relevance of economic growth as a key objective for social policies), the capability approach emphasises the notion of 'capability for work' (Bonvin, 2012), which implies that people should be capacitated to have jobs that they have reason to value. Such an objective calls for enlarging the intervention of the welfare state: it is not only a supply-side matter of equipping people with marketable skills, but also a demand-side issue of shaping markets and jobs in ways that all people may consider as valuable. Thus, with regard to the doer dimension, the issue is twofold: on the one hand, jobs and employment relations ought to be shaped and regulated in a way that people have reason to value; on the other hand, social policies ought to move beyond the sole objective of recommodification towards recognising the value of other human activities.

We indeed acknowledge that being recognised for one's own contribution to society is a fundamental human need (Walker, 2014). Thus, crucially, we are not disputing here the vital importance of *work* or human agency at large but rather the exclusive focus on *employment*. Indeed, the link between people's inclusion in the labour market and the promotion of their capabilities is far from obvious or automatic. Moreover, from a sustainability perspective, some jobs are highly problematic because of their negative impact on the natural environment. Against this background, we argue that there is the need to shift the focus of social policy away from the promotion of any kind of employment – and especially the kind of employment that either undermines workers' capabilities or destroys the environment, or both – towards the support of all valuable activities that meaningfully contribute to social wellbeing and sustainability. This shift entails a move from rewarding only economic production to also rewarding social and cultural reproduction (e.g. care, health, education, arts) and the protection/maintenance as well as the reparation of the natural environment. Combining the capability approach with the 'ethics of care' developed within the feminist literature (e.g. Tronto, 1993), one could argue that public action should no longer focus on including people in the labour market but on promoting their 'capability to take care of the world' through a plurality of activities within and beyond employment (Laruffa, 2021).

Obviously, the value of the activities that single individuals perform is socially constructed. Our interpretation of the doer dimension allows questioning the dominant modes of assessing the value of human action. In this perspective, certain activities may be valuable even though they do not contribute to economic growth and, conversely, the value of other activities may be questionable even though they increase monetary wealth. This point has significant implications for social policies: when activation programmes are elaborated, they should not endorse the view that only productivist and growth-enhancing

activities are worth pursuing such as is the case with work-first or human capital approaches for instance. Rather, social policies should strive to instil alternative conceptions of what is valuable human agency (at work or beyond work) relying on a more encompassing conception of the doer dimension, e.g. through subsidising programmes and measures promoting such alternative views. This would in turn help move beyond productivist and all too often unsustainable visions of human agency. In this context, social policies may be a powerful tool for rewarding activities that contribute to environmental protection and/or reparation, thereby directly contributing to the goal of sustainability.

The idea of a participation income (see Laruffa *et al.*, 2021 in this themed section) is a potential way ahead: it connects the payment of cash benefits, not with employment strictly speaking or with education, but with all forms of valuable human agency. It thus recognises the plurality of valuable societal contributions that people can make and for which they ought to be supported. By retaining the idea of conditionality, but making it much more encompassing in terms of what is recognised as a useful and valuable contribution to the society, the economy or the environment, it contributes to enlarge the doer dimension in line with the capability perspective. It is all the more relevant that many such activities are at risk of not being performed at all if they are not properly supported by social policy mechanisms.

To sum up, concerning the doer dimension, the capability approach insists on the relevance of: a) promoting jobs of high quality; b) recognising the value of human activities beyond employment; c) initiating a debate on what we have 'reason to value' beyond the maximisation of monetary wealth.

The judge dimension: social policy as an opportunity for a democratic debate on sustainable wellbeing

The capability approach – with its emphasis on individuals' freedom to lead valuable lives and on democracy – calls for defining the meaning of wellbeing, human development and quality of life through an inclusive democratic deliberation. In other words, the capability approach requires that all stakeholders are entitled to participate in the public debate on the 'good life'. This means that what people have reason to value – that is, their aspirations and preferences – has to be taken seriously when defining the content of social policies and implementing them. This understanding of human development, in turn, provides a crucial opportunity to question the superiority of actual economic and social practices with regard to their sustainability, and therefore to include the issue of sustainability more deeply in the policy-making process.

The capability approach puts special emphasis on the issue of preference and value formation (Bonvin and Laruffa, 2018b). Values are not the outcome of an individual choice or decision and emerge from social relations. This means that what we value as individuals is socially constructed to a large extent: we tend to value what is recognised valuable in our society or culture. However, such collective values can change when they are confronted to open public discussion. This shows the centrality of the notion of 'capability for voice' in this perspective, as everyone's real freedom to express her viewpoints and make them count in the course of the public debate is the condition for deconstructing existing values and norms and proposing alternatives. From this perspective, and in light of the ecological emergency, the promotion of all stakeholders'

capability for voice may help nourish post-productivist values in society while shifting the focus of public action away from economic growth towards *wellbeing*.

The emphasis on *reason* to value – that is, on *reasonable* preferences and aspirations – also implies that in forming our conception of the good life the finitude of our planet and thus the limited resources at our disposal should be considered. Similarly, democratically debating the meaning of ‘quality of life’ may well promote less materialistic and therefore more sustainable understandings of wellbeing. In this context, it seems essential to recognise that conceptions of the good life are always politically created and socially constructed, as individuals do not form their conception of the good life independently from the social contexts they live in. In our interpretation of the capability perspective, we claim that democratic processes fully recognising their participants’ capacity to aspire and capability for voice are means to promote more sustainable societies, economies and environments. They allow questioning prevailing conceptions of the good life that are shaped by profound power asymmetries, as those actors who benefit from the current system attempt to maintain the visions of the good life that support it – however unsustainable they may be. In particular, the productivist conception of the good life that is functional to an economic system governed by the profit-motive, structurally dependent on growth and inherently based on ever-increasing consumption, may be questioned in such a perspective.

We contend that, in the capability approach, open democratic deliberation allows questioning materialistic predispositions underlying the economic growth paradigm, according to which the bigger or the more is always to be considered as the better. Through such public debate, informed by scientific knowledge about ecological sustainability, citizens are encouraged and even empowered to reflect about their quality of life and how productivist imperatives impact on it. Sen maintains that deliberation and public discussion – interpreted along the lines of the judge dimension, emphasising the promotion of the capacity to aspire and the capability for voice of all stakeholders – are more efficient in promoting equitable and sustainable societies, economies and environments than the use of constraint. He has, for instance, shown how, throughout history, Condorcet’s democratic ideal has been more efficient than Malthus’ advocacy for constraining mechanisms when it came to lowering fertility rates (Sen, 2013). He insists that long-term transformations of societies, economies and environments can take place only if people are really convinced that such changes are legitimate. The use of constraint cannot guarantee such an outcome.

In the same line of thought, we contend that, by taking seriously the judge dimension, the capability approach allows a critical reflection about individual preferences and how they should be supported collectively, rather than an uncritical endorsement of dominant social norms about consumption standards or lifestyles (expensive tastes) or a resigned adaptation to difficult circumstances (adaptive preferences). If policies are designed in such a way, they may be powerful tools to move beyond expensive tastes or adaptive preferences towards reasonable and sustainable preferences. This point has deep implications for how social policies ought to be designed and implemented.

At design level, when ends and means of social policies are discussed, a public debate including all stakeholders allows, for instance, questioning the supremacy of budgetary and economic policies over social policies, which results in constraining the potential scope and ambition of social policies according to what is perceived as economically and financially viable. The design of social policies is then conceived as

the opportunity for a democratic discussion about valuable futures and their implications for individuals and societies. It is not the prerogative of technocrats, experts or administrative elites. At implementation level, the judge dimension calls for considering beneficiaries as co-authors of social policies rather than passive recipients of cash benefits or professional skills. This goes against paternalistic views of most contemporary activation policies, where beneficiaries are activated along lines that they have not chosen and that may have little value in their eyes. Instead, the capability approach suggests that they should be the co-authors of activation policies. At both the design and implementation level, then, social policies are conceived as an opportunity to enhance the judge dimension and promote the participation of all – including vulnerable people – into the democratic discussion about sustainable wellbeing.

To sum up, with respect to the judge dimension, the capability approach requires a) moving beyond individual preferences towards collective ‘reasons to value’; b) focusing on deliberation and discussion rather than constraint for transforming societies, economies and the environment.

Conclusion

Theorising a sustainable social policy is today still an open challenge. Usually, social policy actors tend to ignore environmental issues and to assume the desirability of employment and economic growth. Clearly, this is because real-world welfare states are heavily dependent on both employment and economic growth – which, however, comes at the expenses of the natural environment. In order to address this problem, in recent years there has been an important emerging research field focused on ‘post-productivism’, ‘sustainable wellbeing’ and ‘eco-social’ policies (e.g. Fitzpatrick, 2004; Gough *et al.*, 2008; Koch and Fritz, 2014; Gough, 2017; Hirvilammi and Koch, 2020).

In this article, we sought to contribute to this emerging literature, exploring the potential of the capability approach as a normative framework of reference for such an eco-social welfare state. With its emphasis on individual freedom and democracy, the capability approach may at first sight appear as incapable of taking the principle of sustainability into account. This is even more so given that many interpretations and uses of the capability approach consider economic growth as a prerequisite for promoting individuals’ capabilities. Hence, in this article we developed another understanding of the capability approach, which more explicitly problematises the link between economic growth, on the one hand, and the goal of capability expansion, on the other. On this basis, our argument is that the capability approach allows rejecting the identification of social progress with economic growth, opening instead a democratic debate on the concrete meaning of wellbeing and quality of life and on the best ways to promote them.

Crucially, challenging the view that economic growth is a necessary means for realising and enhancing capabilities actually opens the way for a political vision in which the sustainability imperative may be reconcilable with notions of democracy, individual freedom and wellbeing. Indeed, to the extent that economic growth on the present terms is not only considered unsustainable but also criticised for largely failing to promote capabilities, less materialistic and productivist understandings of the ‘good life’ come to the fore as more beneficial from both an environmental and a wellbeing viewpoint. Rather than conflicting goals then, ecological responsibility and individuals’ freedom to flourish may thus potentially overlap. Yet, this convergence cannot be taken for granted: it

demands a cultural change away from the consumeristic lifestyle as well as an inclusive democratic debate where citizens have the opportunity to co-determine the 'final ends' of societal cooperation and where the sustainable wellbeing of all takes priority over the narrow economic interests of the few.

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Notes

1 In using the concept of 'sustainability', we refer to the classical definition of sustainable development adopted by the 'Brundtland Commission' as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.

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