

International Workshop

Capability and Pragmatism: between social sciences and social philosophy

Wissenschaftskolleg, Berlin

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The Wissenschaftskolleg, the CNRS and the EHESS jointly organize an international workshop devoted to the contribution of pragmatism to capability studies from both a philosophical and a social sciences perspective.

The concept of capability has taken on growing importance in the past decades. Initially conceptualized by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum (Sen & Nussbaum, 1993), it has been translated into public policies and measurements (i.e. Human Development Index of the UNO, micro-credit and empowerment policies of the World Bank...). Coined at an early stage with reference to issues of development, the concept has since spread all over the world, as a more general attempt to conceptualize freedom, inequalities and justice (Salais & Villeneuve, 2004; Leonardis et al., 2012; Subramanian et al., 2013; Otto & Ziegler, 2014).

These many ways to promote the concept of capability resulted in giving it its multi-faceted meaning and favouring its spread; they have, however, hampered conceptual clarity. Related to the concepts of ability, capacity, skill, competence, opportunities, choice and power to act, capability is often reduced to one of these notions to the detriment of the more complex nexus articulating all of them in a whole. In addition, the difficulty of its translation into other languages reinforces the feeling of confusion and lack of accuracy. It turns into *capacité* in French, losing the English distinction between capability and capacity that gives it its strength. In German it is encapsulated in *Verwirklichungschancen*, overemphasizing the opportunity dimension.

Taking the semantic complexity of the concept of capabilities and its criticisms as a starting point, the aim of this workshop is to explore how pragmatist philosophy, and its extensions in social sciences, can contribute to a better understanding of the dimension of personal and social experience at stake in the capability concept.

To what extent can the pragmatist theories of action, given their sensitivity to a socially situated understanding of values, freedom and capacities, help us elaborate further the relationship between capacity, capability and empowerment and enrich their conception (Zimmermann, 2006)?

The potential contribution of pragmatism can be sought at different levels.

First, we are interested in the way pragmatists themselves have developed and understood the concept of capability. John Dewey (1891) was probably one of the very first to employ

the concept, distinguishing it from that of capacity. He shed light on the working synergies between “personal capacities” and the “environing forces” (1921:16) and defined capabilities as resulting from the external supplementation of internal capacities.

Second, George Herbert Mead (1934) insisted, from the perspective of human ecology, on the basic capacity that humans have to give indications to their fellows, to take their selves as objects for themselves, and to act taking the role of a generalized Other. How would it be possible to connect the study of capabilities with the inquiry in social processes of competition, cooperation and communication? Can these capabilities go through a process of institutionalization?

Third, without necessarily resorting to the language of capabilities, the pragmatists have insisted on the interrelations between action, reflexivity and context in ways that are not only fully consistent with the capability approach. They help developing a conception of freedom in situated action - a freedom which is not only formal, but finds its way in concrete settings and life stories. What does it mean for a person to carry on a project and come to terms with her environment (Dewey, 1935, 1939)? What can pragmatism teach us about the dialectics of action, choice, habits and agency?

Fourth, pragmatists have stressed that our capabilities to act effectively depend on the kind of “organized intelligence” (Dewey, 1927) we can rely on and the material resources and supports we have access to, as well as on the kind of interpersonal, cognitive and moral recognition we receive for what we are doing. Mary Parker Follett (1919, 1924) has explored the articulation between individual capabilities and collective empowerment, for instance in neighbourhood or workplace communities. Can we mobilize, as the feminists did, the notion of power-with to think capabilities?

More specifically, we seek contributions that will deal with one or more of the following lines of research:

1. Capacity, capability and the constitution of the self,
2. Capability and the role of the ecological environment, including institutions,
3. Socialization and education as bridging processes between the self and her environment,
4. Experience as the very place of the constitution and actualization of capabilities,
5. Dimensions of power and their enabling or disabling effects.

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