

Shedding light on Sen

The four essays on Amartya Sen in this special issue of the *International Journal of Social Economics* focus on some of his philosophical debts with the aim of shedding light on his social economics – particularly, his version of capabilities liberalism. Not unlike Martha Nussbaum's version of capabilities liberalism, Sen's draws on an heterogeneous amalgam of social and political philosophers, including Aristotle, Adam Smith, Mary Wollstonecraft and especially Karl Marx and John Stuart Mill. This assorted intellectual pedigree helps us better appreciate the unorthodoxy of his consequentialism and the policy prescriptions flowing from it that many of his defenders find so compelling and his detractors find less than satisfactory. Sen practices social economics in a now less familiar sense, investing his policy recommendations with robust philosophizing.

Using and abusing philosophical debts

A guest editor's prerogative includes requesting that contributors hew a theme or set of themes and I have not hesitated exercising it rather insistently. In particular, I have asked that all contributors do more than use Sen's philosophical debts to shed light on his thinking although all four essays do this primarily. I have also encouraged each contributor to address tacitly if not explicitly what is at stake in trying to do this sort of thing to begin with.

Now many readers of this journal might find such methodological matters something of an unnecessary philosophical distraction. The remit of the *International Journal of Social Economics* is after all the social impacts of economic activities and not the hermeneutical conundrums swirling about the use of intellectual history by economists and other social scientists. Other scholarly forums may seem far more appropriate for taking on such controversies. But in my judgment, these hermeneutical puzzles should not be dismissed as superfluous especially whenever social theorists and economists like Sen appeal deliberately to past thinkers and texts, inviting us to use the latter as a way of illuminating their own later thinking. Defending and/or criticizing Sen requires understanding him as he intends to be understood and understanding him as he intends requires taking seriously his perspicuous self-identification with key features of specific political philosophical traditions. Put more broadly, our first obligation is simply understanding what a particular theorist is trying to say so that we can then agree or disagree. If he or she claims to be working from within a particular philosophical tradition or set of traditions as Sen does, then we dare not ignore what it means to work within a philosophical tradition nor dare we eschew the exegetical challenges facing us in our efforts to use philosophical traditions to shed light on contemporary theorists with whom we are engaged.

The exegetical challenges of appealing to past canonical thinkers like Marx and Mill to elucidate one's policy prescriptions – as Sen does – are significant. First of all,

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by inviting us to interpret him via his debts to Marx and Mill, Sen also invites us to understand them retrospectively via him. That is, we risk being tempted to rewrite them through the conceptual landscape of Sen's capability approach. This error is especially likely to occur with scholars less familiar with Marx and Mill's original texts as well as with the nuanced scholarly debates that continue plaguing interpreting them correctly. Using Marx and Mill to illuminate Sen may end up obscuring them more than, or as much as, it helps us to make better sense of Sen. And this is as much as to say that what we are really doing is just coming up with an additional tactic for reinforcing the way we are already inclined to read, accept or reject him. We end up not only misreading or reconstructing Marx and Mill wrongheadedly, but we also end just bolstering our positive and negative prejudices about Sen and the social impacts of the alternative economic policies he is trying so hard to make us see and do something about. In short, we just go in circles neither enhancing our understanding and deepening our critical assessment of Sen, nor gaining a more sophisticated grasp of either Marx or Mill.

These caveats about using philosophical debts as a way of shedding light on current theorizing are not meant to suggest that doing this sort of thing should be avoided. There would be no point to this special issue otherwise. These caveats are merely a warning for those primarily interested in understanding the social impacts of economic policies Sen means to unmask and who also think that understanding his intellectual debts is accordingly useful.

The four essays

This special issue opens with Antony Burns' engaging "Happy slaves? The adaptation problem and identity politics in the writings of Amartya Sen." Whereas the following three contributions focus on Sen's intellectual debts to one or two specific philosophers, Burns' piece is more wide ranging, highlighting his similarities not only with past thinkers like Mary Wollstonecraft and Mill but also taking up some of his contemporary critics. Burns' essay therefore is the best place to begin for those primarily interested in the strengths, liabilities and social impacts of the capability approach in general and for those less concerned with how his acknowledged philosophical influences illuminate his thinking. More specifically, it joins what seem like three distinct issues. The first issue is the so-called "adaptation problem." The second issue concerns how this problem bears on Sen's attitude toward slavery. As is plain from the quotation from Sen that introduces Burns' essay, Sen worries whether there can be contented slaves or at least contented victims to exploitation. The third issue Burns raises concerns the bearing of Sen's worries about contented victimization for identity politics. According to Burns, focusing on the possibility of slaves and victims being happy helps us understand Sen's views on the question of how adapting to one's circumstances contributes to the subjection of women, especially in development economies.

Next follows Ian Fraser's stimulating contribution, "Sen, Marx and justice: a critique," which explores in depth Sen's appropriation of parts of Marx's appraisal of capitalism, which Fraser insists historically decontextualizes Marx and thus distorts him. Fraser's paper turns to Sen's utilization of aspects of Marx's approach to distributive justice. For Fraser, Sen's attempts to use Marx's ideas to inform his theory of justice founder because Sen groups Marx with thinkers that would not accept his steadfast commitment to abolishing capitalism in the name of communism. Sen also purportedly reads Marx through the conceptual panorama of contemporary analytical

Marxism and methodological individualism which distort Marx. Moreover, according to Fraser, Sen's hope that positional objectivity can help establish genuine redistributive justice under capitalism is naïve given how class interests always disfigure impartiality. In sum, Fraser concludes that Sen's appropriation of Marx's approach to justice – while welcomed – fails to probe the underlying structural constraints that any form of advanced capitalism poses to meaningful reform of economic inequality.

Mozaffar Qizilbash's excellent "Capability, objectivity and 'false consciousness': on Sen, Marx and J.S. Mill" follows third, examining in depth Sen's combined debts to Mill as well as to Marx. More than anyone writing about Sen, Qizilbash has underscored the vital importance of appreciating Sen's intellectual debts to past theorists as crucial to making better sense of his defense of the capabilities approach. According to Qizilbash, for instance, some of the parallels between Sen's capability approach and Marx's views become sharper when we note that Marx and Friedrich Engels explicitly argued that the transformation from capitalism to communism would involve the development of "a totality of capacities." Qizilbash also discusses Sen's appropriation of what resembles Marx and Engel's treatment of "false consciousness," suggesting in the spirit of both that critical public discussion can make evaluative judgments better informed and less parochial so that they connect more closely with what people have reason to value. Qizilbash argues that while this line of reasoning clearly recalls Marx and Engels' thinking, it also closely evokes Mill's views about the role of unbiased "competent judges" in defending liberty of thought and discussion so vital to improving social well-being.

David Weinstein's contribution, "Why Sen's interpretation of the liberal tradition matters and is also problematic to understanding his social economics," rounds out the special issue, building on Qizilbash's appreciation of the importance of Mill for better understanding Sen. It likewise explores how identifying himself so enthusiastically with Mill sheds light on our estimation of Sen's defense of the capabilities approach. But it also takes up more forcefully than the three previous contributors the interpretative dilemmas facing those attracted to trying to understand Sen through the lens of past thinkers he has so strongly identified with. Besides exploring some of the problematic implications of Sen's readily identifying with Mill's liberalism in particular, this essay also speculates on what it means to identify with any political philosophical tradition and how such identification colors and adds momentum to both one's political theorizing and practical prescriptions.

Conclusion

All four contributors to this special number share the conviction that Sen's theoretical impact on social economics and combating global poverty have been quite significant no less than his influence on contemporary political and social philosophy. Sen is a consummate interdisciplinarian of the first order. All four contributors, despite their varying assessments of how compelling they find his claims, also share the conviction that attending carefully to his intellectual philosophical debts sheds considerable light on his reasoning. Social and economic theorizing is contextual, invariably confined by its historical roots. Appreciating these historical ancestries better than we have can certainly assist us in understanding and coming to terms with later generational theories that they have spawned. This is especially true when theorists like Sen explicitly invite us to read them through specific philosophical traditions.

But as suggested above, inviting us to understand him through the lens of Marx, Mill and others can be double-edged in that it not only risks causing us to read too much Marx or Mill into capabilities liberalism but also encourages the unwary to distort Marx and Mill. The first of these two implications naturally bears significantly on how compelling contemporary readers find Sen's conception of distributive justice and the public policy recommendations based on it. All four contributions attend to these concerns in varying degrees, which readers of this special issue will hopefully find useful in their own efforts of coming to terms with the capabilities approach and its legacy.

David Weinstein