

Laudatio for the Laurea Honoris Causa conferred to Amartya Sen
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(Enrica Chiappero Martinetti)

To try to summarize in so little time the personal and academic life-trajectory of Professor Amartya Sen is neither easy nor perhaps even possible, given the vast range and depth of his scientific contribution. It would be quite difficult indeed to recapitulate his unimaginably rich academic career, begun when, not yet 23, he became Professor of Economics at Jadavpur University in Calcutta. This marked the beginning of a journey that has taken him to many of the world's most distinguished universities, from the London School of Economics to Delhi University, from Oxford to Berkeley, from Stanford to Cornell, from MIT to Harvard.

He has received many of the most prestigious international awards and recognitions; has been conferred honorary doctorates and degrees by some of the world's most eminent academic institutions; and in 1998 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics for the fundamental contributions he has made to welfare economics.

It would be even more difficult, I think, to attempt to summarize Professor Sen's extensive scientific contribution by seeking within it a single *fil rouge*, although this does indeed exist. Questions linked to collective choice, individual rationality, equity, freedom and distributive justice, human rights, and cultural identity have all been central to Sen's work. He has also dealt more recently with issues of great current importance, amongst them the reasons underlying war, the so-called clash between civilizations, the future of welfare systems in Europe, the role of international organizations in the complex global sociopolitical scenario, and Indian history and culture. With great mastery and naturalness, Sen deftly weaves together different levels of analysis, interpretations, tools, and languages. He handles highly technical aspects within the fields of social choice theory and poverty measurement in the same insightful and graceful manner that he offers theoretical and analytic

reflections on matters of ethics, economics or philosophy of importance today – matters to which he often seeks answers by hearkening back to the work of thinkers such as Aristotle, Tommaso d’Aquino, Adam Smith, Confucius, and Tagore.

Reading Sen’s writings is like embarking on a fantastic intellectual voyage through time, cultures, and academic disciplines, where different levels of analysis and reflection intersect to create a single, comprehensive picture.

The idea of complexity as a necessity, not an obstacle

What emerges clearly in Sen’s writings is the need to recognize that complexity is an inescapable characteristic of the social sciences.

The tendency towards theoretical modelization in mainstream economics means that a social reality – visible and complex – is substituted with an invisible, far more simplistic one. The latter is meant to adequately represent the former, and to confirm its own validity. This type of approach, while it offers undeniable advantages, risks obscuring the essence of real social problems.

The intrinsic complexity and ambiguity that characterize a large number of the issues being studied by economists today – *in primis* the matters of equity and well-being that are so central to Sen’s interests – undoubtedly pose problems that are not easy to solve. But one cannot find the answers to these problems merely by ignoring them, or trying to hide them behind a presumed, partial, precision. In any field of research, the level of precision at which we can arrive is never independent of the nature of the argument in question and hence, as Sen reminds us: “*In social investigation and measurement, it is undoubtedly more important to be vaguely right than to be precisely wrong*” (Sen, 2003).

Sen’s methodology is somehow the opposite of that applied in mainstream economic theory: starting off with very well-defined, essential questions, he gradually introduces various degrees of complexity and complementary interpretations drawn from other disciplines, with the aim certainly not of complicating matters further, but rather of making the problem being studied even clearer and finding a solution to it.

This is a *fil rouge* that characterizes all of Sen's work, and it is this that should be the perspective of all intellectuals who will not be satisfied by searching for simple answers to problems which are, by their very nature, not simple at all.

I will limit myself to a brief discussion of four main areas of research where this approach is particularly evident and fruitful: social choice theory; the notion of human development; the problem of cultural identity and freedom; and the link between democracy and human rights.

Social choice theory

The first area in which Sen warns of the risks of oversimplification is that of social choice theory. As he reminds us in his Nobel Lecture (Sen, 1999a), in moving from individual preferences to that of social choices we are required to identify aggregate principles that make it possible to formulate cogent answers to questions such as: "*Does society prefer x to y?*"; "*Does society choose x or y?*", "*Is decision or action x socially right or wrong?*" – all this while being faced with a multiplicity of interests, preferences and moral judgments corresponding to the number of individuals that are part of that society.

Moreover, moving from the individual level of analysis to the social one involves a process of aggregation between information relevant for reaching indicators of a normative nature – whether they be measures of national income, of well-being, of poverty, or of inequality – that make it possible to rank and compare different assets.

Is it possible to identify plausible aggregative criteria that allow us to find unambiguous answers to these questions? Arrow's impossibility theorem has been there for over half a century to show us that, unlike under a dictatorship, there exists no procedure for social choice that allows us to reach social preference functions that guarantee the minimal conditions of internal coherence, starting from the aggregation of individual preferences.

Seeking to respond in a constructive manner to the pessimism and discouragement that this answer has generated among scholars working on welfare economics, Sen has explored two possible solutions. The first involves a reformulation of the axiomatic structure postulated by Arrow, in particular

through the weakening of the condition of rationality. The second, which is more radical but also more promising, suggests making use of interpersonal comparisons and broadening the informational base beyond the metric of utility to include freedom and substantive opportunities as fundamental elements of individual well-being.

In neither case is the path for scholars an easy one, due both to the technical and analytical complexity and the informational requirements involved, and to the fundamental importance of the issues in question.

On the one hand, and in line with consolidated practice in this field of research, Sen considers irremissible the need to preserve formal and mathematical techniques as well as to make use of axiomatic formulations. However, he considers it equally necessary to complement such formal methods with the strength of informal reasoning and common sense; indeed, the more complex the problem being worked out, the more indispensable it becomes to do so. On the other hand, the need to make interpersonal comparisons, which becomes even more important when the informational base upon which such comparisons are founded is broadened, suggests that it might be reasonable to allow for partial, rather than full, comparability. However, according to Sen, this lack of completeness should not be perceived as too great of a limit. The intrinsic incompleteness and ambiguity in many of the issues that arise in social choice theory should instead be acknowledged and accepted without embarrassment. Indeed, a precise, rigorous formulation should seek to capture this ambiguity, rather than ignore it.

In addition, there is a pragmatic reason prompting us to come to terms with the issue of incompleteness: many reasonable decisions in welfare economics, social ethics and political responsibility can be made just as easily by narrowing the comparison to those areas in which the relevant alternatives are delineated without ambiguity, and leaving aside other alternatives of little importance. That is, it is important to try to avoid (and here I cite Sen, 1992) “maintaining complete silence until everything has been sorted out and the world shines in dazzling clarity”.

Poverty, development, freedom and inequality

A second field in which Sen reminds us of the necessity to use more complex and articulated conceptual structures is that dealing with poverty, development and inequality. In contrast to the prevailing vision of development, which associates it with monetary indicators such as income or GDP growth rate, Sen suggests an idea of human development that is all in all quite simple, yet rich with implications.

Human development is conceptualized by Sen as the expansion of an individual's opportunities, or real possibilities, to choose and to realize the type of life that he or she wishes to pursue. It is an idea of development that goes beyond the simple availability of goods and resources, looking rather towards what people can do with the means that are available to them. Among the essential opportunities for human beings is that of having available adequate resources to guarantee a decent standard of living, but also the possibility of leading a long and healthy life, of acquiring knowledge, of participating fully in social and political life, of developing one's talents and creativity, of having real work and professional opportunities. All these options contribute to determining the well-being – not only material – of individuals and, in Sen's language, represent his or her "capability set". To be able to make concrete use of these options, however, people must be free to decide and to choose for themselves and thus freedom must necessarily underlie any process of development.

Beside freedom, in Sen's work we are constantly reminded of the value of equality, which is understood as equal capabilities for individuals to pursue their aims. Odd as it may seem, in formulating his notion of equality, Sen actually calls into question what could be considered as the egalitarian principle itself, the one affirming that "all men are equal". There are many elements of interpersonal diversity that affect our conversion rates; that is, our ability to transform means and available resources into the ends and goals that we want to realize. These are not elements of distinction due to intrinsic personal characteristics alone, such as age, sex, physical and psychological conditions, abilities and talents, desires and expectations; but also differences linked to the external environment, taken in the broadest sense. One's family, social and

economic context, the natural environment, social norms as well as institutional assets and cultural factors – all these and much more comes into play in defining the capability set, and influencing one's real possibilities to make free choices.

Human diversity would not be a problem in itself were it not for the fact that these differences – in terms of gender, race, religion, residence, culture, related to social and economic factors – are frequently associated with forms of discrimination that jeopardize people's possibility to realize their life plans and sometimes, tragically, threaten their very survival. Today, as in the past, the world produces and reproduces elements of difference that can generate severe discrimination and deep inequalities in terms of opportunities. It is these forms of inequality, these problems of poverty and underdevelopment to which today's society must face up.

It's no coincidence that the *Lectio doctoralis* which Professor Sen will be giving shortly is focused on just such an issue: that of physical and mental disability, and their profound consequences in terms of the real freedoms and opportunities, and thus the individual well-being, of disabled people; but also on the poor attention that economic theory, theories of distributive justice and, generally speaking, our society focuses on these questions.

Cultural freedom and plural identity

The multiplicity of above-mentioned differences has serious implications in terms of collective choices and social decisions, not least in terms of the defense of cultural freedoms and the setting of civil rules, with respect for mutual differences. And here we move into a third field of research that has become of central importance in Sen's more recent work.

Human diversity gives rise to a broad range of identities. Each individual develops his or her own sense of belonging among a plurality of groups, depending on sex, nationality, citizenship, ethnic background, ancestry, language, professional role, and religious or spiritual beliefs, but also on political preferences, tastes in music or food, and so forth. Inevitably, each of us must

learn to come to terms with these multiple identities, yet these different senses of belonging can be in potential conflict.

When the decisions to be made are not neutral in a moral sense or in terms of social responsibility, or when they impact on third parties, we must seriously consider our identities, reflecting on the weight and meaning that they may have on our decision-making and the consequences they may have on other people. But in the end, each one of us must decide which of our identities will take priority in orienting the choices we consider most appropriate in each particular context.

Sen reminds us that “reasoning before identity” and questioning oneself about the responsibility involved in our choices can be very helpful in assuring that we give the proper attention to important questions related to our social existence.

This argument can be helpful, too, in thinking about certain global issues today, issues which are becoming increasingly sources of concern. To cite just two examples: on the one hand, there is the need to defend cultural diversity from the asymmetric power of globalization and from the imposition of a Western consumer model that could lead to the standardization of lifestyles and seriously endanger local cultures. On the other hand, there is a fear of a potential “clash of civilizations”, and in particular the fear that Western civilization, considered to be pluralist and tolerant, is under threat by other, far less benevolent, and far more authoritarian, cultures.

In terms of the former, Sen shares some of the fears; but he strongly denies the latter. It is neither possible nor useful to draw a clear distinction between “Western” and “non-Western” civilization, nor can one ignore the existence of important elements of heterogeneity within single cultures and civilizations. The risk is that such dichotomies – “us against them” – can create situations of tension and potential conflict and ignore the far realer, multiple elements of difference that can generate discrimination, such as those between rich and poor; between men and women; between classes, castes and ethnic groups; between nationalities, languages, political positions, value systems, and so forth.

Once again, Sen identifies a fair society as one that promotes and defends human development and acknowledges human freedom in general, including cultural freedoms, that is, the freedom to choose one's own identity and to live one's life with respect for and from members of different cultural, religious, political, ethnic, linguistic, and other groups.

Human rights and democracy

As we have seen, the notion of freedom and real opportunities may constitute the basis for a normative theory of social choice, in general, and for a theory of justice, in particular. But it is equally relevant as a normative foundation for a theory of human rights (Sen 2004a), and it is to this area that I would now like, in closing, to draw your attention.

The centrality of rights and of democratic processes is a topic to which Sen has dedicated some of his more recent contributions, promoting a notion of democracy understood not in the more narrow, limited sense in which it is often taken – that is, exercising one's right to vote – but as a much broader exercise, something that Rawls defines as the “exercise of public reasoning”. The formal right to vote must be accompanied by the formal acknowledgement and protection of other rights and freedoms. Respect for legality, the right to free, uncensored information, the real possibility of citizens to participate in political debate, to speak and listen without fear and constraint; in a nutshell, the capacity to influence public choices at every point in a society's political life, not merely when elections are coming up – this is what constitutes the very essence of democracy. Civil and political rights and public discussion not only have an intrinsic value for human life and individual well-being; they also have important practical relevance, as they allow people to call attention to their own needs. Indeed, as Sen has so effectively demonstrated in his studies on famine, democratic countries with relatively independent media have been able to manage or control the risks entailed by severe drought and flooding, risks which in the past, in non-democratic contexts, led instead to the decimation of millions of human lives.

In a recent essay on the global roots of democracy, Sen calls attention to the fact that “the protective role of democracy is strongly missed when it is most needed” (Sen, 2004b). The most vulnerable, the ones who pay the highest price in the case of events such as this, are the weakest groups: the poor, minorities, women, and children. They are the ones who most need the protective power of democracy, but they are also those who, often, have the least ability to make themselves heard.

But beyond its intrinsic and instrumental value, the practice of democracy has yet a third function. Sen defines this as a “constructive function”, and it is what allows people to learn from each other, and allows a society to form its own values, to discuss and define the concept of needs (both economic and not), of rights, and of duties, and to identify its own priorities.

Sen also reminds us that support for pluralism, diversity and fundamental freedoms does not belong exclusively to the West, but can be found in the roots and histories of numerous cultures and civilizations. Alongside Greek culture, to which the very notion of democracy is generally attributed, there are many other traditions found in Eastern culture that cannot be ignored. Similarly, the value of public discussion as recognized by the Greeks and Romans, important as their contribution was, did not belong exclusively to those ancient civilizations; public discussion had been broadly practiced in India and in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia since the third century BC.

Once again, then, in reaffirming the universal value of democracy, we must not lose sight of the plurality of expressions that can represent it. The fact that a value is able to achieve general consensus does not necessarily mean that it qualifies as a universal value (as Sen emphasizes, not even the value of maternal sentiment would be able to pass this test). Gandhi’s value of non-violence and Tagore’s freedom of thought did not necessarily enjoy general consensus. What is important is to ask ourselves if people can have valid reasons for accepting these values; and in order to find this out, we must test them through public discussion.

According to Sen, human rights too must be understood first and foremost as ethical demands that need to be scrutinized through open discussion. If the

broad, direct participation of citizens, groups, and communities in this democratic process is what guarantees the objectivity of the ethical demands, its extension across borders and cultures will be able to give the process the required impartiality.

The fact that human rights can inspire legislation is certainly, according to Sen, an important element, yet it is somehow a further fact, rather than a constitutive characteristic of these rights. It is the understanding of the ethical value of human rights, and their fundamental link with freedom, that provides fertile ground for the claim to promote, protect, and act publicly in the defence of rights and freedoms.

In conclusion, it is Sen's rich interweaving of ethics and economics, of the pluralism of values and democracy, of freedom and justice, that distinguish his immensely important role in today's scientific panorama. If a mentor is he or she who, with the richness, profundity, and consistency of his or her scientific contribution is able to delineate new pathways down which knowledge shall progress, there is no doubt that Amartya Sen is indeed a great mentor. And as is often the case with true mentors, the pathways of research that Sen has mapped out for us are not easy ones to travel, nor are they lacking in obstacles. They require tenacity and curiosity; they force us to come to terms with the limits of the tools of our own disciplines; they insist upon a dialogue among the various disciplines; they urge us to avoid the risk of seeking hurried, reductive answers to questions that are as intrinsically complex as they are urgent and important. It is of immense comfort to know that Amartya Sen will continue to guide us along these pathways, with the undiminished energy and enthusiasm of a man who has yet much to teach us.

Beyond the official and solemn nature of this ceremony, I would like to express my deepest personal gratitude and esteem, and most sincere affection, for someone who has truly been for me, a very great mentor.

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