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3. ENERGY POVERTY: A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

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Most theories of justice centre on the social, ignoring consideration of natural resources. Similarly, the energy question, often approached as a technical one, usually neglects related social and political issues.¹ Amartya Sen's theory of capabilities (1999, 2009) provides a framework to think about justice as inseparably social and environmental by indicating a first step to the following question: how can the questions of energy justice (and therefore, questions of energy poverty) be integrated with the pursuit of ecological transition? This Chapter introduces a solution by combining Sen's theory with Castoriadis' thoughts on individual and social imaginary.

Indeed, to develop a more comprehensive perspective on energy justice than offered by the classical utilitarian point of view, Sen's theory of capabilities seems promising, because it allows us to think about our freedom other than as open and free access to resources for a good life. Capabilities may indeed be defined as the conditions that allow many different ways of life: one can think of what constitutes a valuable life and then find the means to achieve it. That life does not necessarily require a great deal of energy to be actualised. This approach thus allows a decoupling of fundamental human needs and access to fossil fuel energy, a decoupling that moves us away from the concept of "fuel needs" that can be unmet, as implied by the term "fuel poverty".

For Amartya Sen, poverty is fundamentally seen in terms of a shortfall of basic capabilities. In addition, he distinguishes two dimensions of freedom: the possibility of working toward reasonable goals that we value, and the process of that choice itself. We call the latter the "empowerment process of the subject", channelling Castoriadis. Sen thus offers a notion of freedom apt to apply to the basic theory of energy transitions, without requiring a revolutionary and radically utopian project. First, according to the capability approach, reflection on environmental justice should privilege empirical comparisons of actual life circumstances and reject what seems unjust. Second, justice is comprised of many dimensions. Third, the conceptual pair of "capability – means of its accomplishment" is of special interest in avoiding a focus on false goals.

Sen's approach welcomes a plurality of visions of the good life while carefully respecting individual freedom. It allows us to pose the fundamental political question as focusing on the ends, rather than the means. This gives us the ability to broaden greatly the field of reflection for energy poverty, orienting it to an alternative vision of development.

Nevertheless, to be applicable to environmental problems, the capability approach seems too centred on social questions of human development, which is an abstraction of the "human condition" (Arendt, 1958). Furthermore, the capability approach appears to be too individualist

¹ This Chapter briefly summarises the article written by Frogneux et al. (2014) during the 2GENDERS research project.

in that the distinction between individual and collective freedoms is too vague, especially so in the current context of ecological limits, as namely exemplified by climate change and loss of biodiversity.

Democratic procedures of representation can appear too slow to address the urgent environmental situation society faces. Hans Jonas, who warned against the natural limits of our lifestyle as early as 1979, did not think that democracy could integrate ecological constraints, given its focus on short-term interests rather than intergenerational issues (Jonas, 1984 [1979]). But expertocratic approaches are also slow in convincing citizen to change their way of life (Hamilton, 2010) and not very effective in the long term since they do not transform the sense of responsibility nor social practices.

To resolve this tension between wanting personal and collective freedoms despite shared ecological constraints, we must think of democratic freedom as being capable of self-limitation. We can then establish an entirely different way of designing our relationship to energy and the environment: energy is not necessarily the condition for a good and happy life (Sen), any more than the environment is a neutral and inexhaustible resource (Jonas). The condition of our autonomy must be understood in both senses of the word: both the means for possibility and the framework that limits it (Castoriadis, 1987 [1975]).

Indeed, in that book, Castoriadis proposes to think of both individual autonomy and collective autonomy as deploying themselves together. Therefore, any form of ecological transition requires democratic institutions, while for Castoriadis these democratic institutions are not the typical ones, but radical ones that are also a collective empowerment of society, that is to say a more just society. In a circular process, the individual imagination is both the product as well as the condition of the social imaginary. From this basis, individual action and collective action are based on individual and collective freedoms that create new and more just institutions for living together.

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