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»Capabilitarian« issues with labour

Thematic Group Work and Employment
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Capabilities and Transformative Institutions
Motivation of the paper

To meet a shared concern of the Thematic Group
- need to adapt the capability approach CA to take better account of work and employment

To propose a modular structure (»grid«)
- for reviewing and comparing capability literature (exercise in stock taking)
- for discussing conceptual issues, respecting pluralism

To contribute to some of these issues

To indicate in what directions to look for additional theoretical content

Work in progress, full paper to follow
Capability accounts in labour studies – an evaluative grid, based on Robeyns’ (2017) »modular view« (1)

Subject area and purpose (B1)

Multidimensional space for work (A1, A2, A5 – A7)
  − Functionings and / or capabilities (A1, A2, B6)
  − Selection of dimensions for work(-related) functionings and / or capabilities (B2),
    − Selection of weights (when applied) (C2)
  − Linkages of functions and / or capabilities in the evaluative space (A5)
  − Other dimensions of value (e. g. procedural) (A6)

Conversion
  − Accounts of resources (A4)
  − Conversion factors (A3)
  − Structural constraints (B5)
Capability accounts in labour studies – an evaluative grid, based on Robeyns’ (2017) »modular view« (2)

Normative concerns and choices
- Functionings and/or capabilities of individual value (A8)
- Other normative concerns (when relevant) (A6, A7, C4)

Accounts of diversity (B3)

Accounts of agency (B4)

Theoretical commitments
- »Metatheoretical« concepts (B7)
- Concepts and theories outside capability approach (C1)

Methods (C3)
Purposes for capability accounts of work – as encountered so far

- Foundational theories of work, conceptual work
- Normative discussion of policies, e.g.
  - capability as informational base for labour and welfare policies
  - critique of employment rate as leading indicator
  - critique of flexicurity, employability, activation paradigm
- Empirical policy/program evaluation (»capability-informed«)
  - e.g. vocational training, employment services
- »Thick description«, narratives, autobiographical »small stories«
- Quantitative measurement, e.g.
  - composite indicator of quality of employment (Alkire/Foster method)
Functionings and / or capabilities – How to include work in the capability set

Work – only a means or also an end?

Work as instrumental, with impacts on valued functionings / capabilities
- »characteristics-providing activities« (Suppa 2019)

Work as a subset of the capability set
- »through work, in work, for meaningful work« (Bueno 2022)
- »capability for work« (Bonvin 2012)

The many meanings of work
- Work as a multidimensional »bundle« of functionings
  - E.g. five capabilities of »professional development« (Lambert et al. 2012)

Selection depends on purpose of study – various methods

Dimensions are value neutral per se
Selection of dimensions for work(-related) functionings and / or capabilities – important »metatheoretical« distinctions (1)

Work form:
- paid work (employed, self-employed, informal), reproductive and care work

Market aspect of labour (»emploi«, Zimmermann 2014)
- (Wage) labour as a marketable »fictitious commodity« (Polanyi 1944)
- Labour force status
  - (self-)employed, unemployed, discouraged, not in labour force:
- Aggregates as units of analysis: local, regional, (inter-)national
- Subject area of labour (market) economics

Production aspect of labour (»travail«, Zimmermann 2014)
- Labour process (Braverman 1974, Burawoy 1985)
- Firms, production facilities (“shop floor”) as units of analysis
- Subject area of labour studies, industrial sociology
Selection of dimensions for work(-related) functionings and / or capabilities – important »metatheoretical« distinctions (2)

Job and work as different points of entry for study
- Jobs are firm-centered; work is worker-centered (a characteristic of his/her working life, work experience)

Instrumental and / or constitutive aspects of work (trade-offs possible)
- instrumental: income, legal status, entitlements that come with employment
- constitutive: safe and healthy working conditions, individual claims on work process and professional development,
- both: e.g. social relations (»strength of weak ties«, Granovetter 1973), work-based skills
Linkages (Robeyns 2017: »combinations or sets of potential functionings open to us«)

If work is not considered part of the capability space
- need for a special labour—wellbeing nexus (Suppa 2019)

If work is a subset of capability set
- linkages between work functionings
  - typologies of occupational (status) (e.g. Paugam 1999: »rapport au travail«, »rapport à l’emploi«
- linkages between work and other functionings
  - work as a »fertile advantage« / »corrosive disadvantage« (Wolff/De-Shalit 2007)
  - linked (working) lives, division of paid and reproductive work in household, »dual exchange« with employer and partner/family (Goedicke et al. 2007)
  - »zones« defined by employment status, welfare state entitlements, primary social relations (zones of integration, precarity, disaffiliation, relief; Castel 1995)
Conversion issues (1): resources

If work is only a means, it is providing, not demanding resources

If work is a potentially valuable functioning, capabilities »in« and »for« work require resources

- economic view on resources, e.g.
  - wage-welfare nexus (»indirect wage«; »social property« Castel 1995)
  - public (employment) services, childcare
  - family resources, partner income

- Wider view (action resources), e.g.
  - social networks, political, collective resources
■ Conversion issues (2): conversion factors

■ Personal factors, e.g.
  – family/household arrangement, prior working life, migration
  – human capital (critically: Bonvin 2011), social capital (van Dijk 2022)
  – (adaptive) preference: individual trade-offs between claims on professional fulfilment, income aspect and social relations (Paugam 1999)
  – individual responsibility as a politically contested issue

■ Structural factors, e.g.
  – work as »socially dependent individual capability« (Sen 2002)
  – labour (wage and self-employed) is structured by social institutions (Pries 1998)
    – (inter-)national level: industrial relations, labour law, welfare state, employment services
    – firm level: work organisation, »human resources« management, »employment systems« (Köhler et al. 2010)
Conversion issues (3): constraints

Structural constraints – some candidates
- Labour market restrictions – by segments (segmentation theory)
- Employees’ »human flourishing« not an overriding interest of for-profit firms and non-profit agencies
  - Conflicts over control and (laborious) consent in the labour process
  - In many studies, capability approach is a dissenting view

Conversion as a contested issue, e.g.
- Employability – individual (adaptive) characteristic or relational concept?
- Relational (bio-psycho-social) model of disablement in human rights discourse (UN CDP)
Work capabilities and transformative Institutions – changes in the world of labour are framed by changes in regulation

Incremental processes transform institutional settings
- increasing female workforce attachment
- digitalisation of the labour process
- firm vs. (global) value chain as unit of analysis — boundaries of the firm turn fluid
  - »fragmentation« (Wolf 2018)
- informalisation of work
- migration and ethnic (racial) layering of sectoral workforce (e.g. Amazon, meatpacking)

In pandemic, climate and energy crises (»chronic emergency«, Malm 2020)
- institutional change by disaster – disruptive, impacts workers in uncoordinated ways

Optimally, eco-social transformation is co-managed by »capability-enhancing« labour policies
- Normative concepts and issues – from individual valuation to generalization

- Generalized concepts for valued work functionings and capabilities
  - »good«, »decent« (ILO 1999), »meaningful« (Weidel 2018) work

- The »Goerne critique«: often, normative reference points are external to the capability approach (Goerne 2010)

- Other normative concerns, e.g.
  - gender equality, global justice, human rights, sustainability of work, environmental justice
  - capability claims of clients as »co-producers« – the case of interactive service work
  - More generally, the capability claims of others (Bueno 2022: »individually« and »socially« capability-enhancing work)
Diversity, agency

Accounts of diversity
- intersectional disadvantage, disability
- relation between normative individualism and class action – collective capabilities?

Accounts of agency
- »voice« (Bonvin 2012) – capability or procedural concern?
- capability to aspire (Lambert et al 2012; Baillergeau/Duyvendak 2017)
To be reflected: different »metatheoretical commitments« with regard to work. As for myself …

Work as a specifically human way to relate to nature and to others (Marx)
- work, itself a natural force, and nature are »co-productive« (Bloch 1973)

Alienation experienced in wage labour is a historical shortfall to be overcome
- Even sold as labour power, even degraded, work remains a personal activity, involving the worker as a subject
- Therefore, alienation in the work process remains contested

Idea of work as a capability is transformational, points beyond wage labour

To exclude work from the capability set would mean to
- discard claims to a core domain of human life
- follow the opposition of labour vs. leisure in the neoclassical labour supply function
- reflect and reproduce alienation in wage labour theoretically
Methods

The need for a dynamic account of work capabilities (Bartelheimer et al. 2011)
  - work-related capabilities are not discrete items
    - working lives are sequentially ordered (Bartelheimer et al. 2008)
    - work functionings can be episodic, recurrent, continuous
    - choices at turning points, interventions have a »before« (t) and »after« (t + n)
  - valued functionings need to be sustained (Wolff/De-Shalit 2007: »secure functionings«)
  - advantages / disadvantages accumulate over time

Multi-level analysis: allow for levels of institutional regulation

Strength of mixed methods

Elements of participatory research are expedient
Capability accounts of work better be interdisciplinary

Good reasons for capability metric:
- wherever workers’ individual experience, agency is essential for understanding, as with:
  - individual situations of transitions in working lives (e.g. »tailored« interventions)
  - impacts of institutional change and institutional intervention on individual workers

We can quote scripture – but in capability theories of work left to our devices

Capability approach has good reasons for additional theoretical input, from:
- labour economics on market aspect of work
- labour studies, industrial sociology on production aspect of work (labour process)
- life course studies on dynamics of capability formation over time

Other disciplines have equally good reasons for a capability metric
- Attention to subjectivity as a concern in industrial sociology
- Call for »transversal« labour studies, comprising »all of labour« (Haubner/Pongratz 2021)