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## Poverty, Freedom, and Solidarity in the Thought of Amartya Sen

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### Summary

After the fall of communism in 1989 in Poland, a large portion of decision-makers responsible for the socioeconomic transformations held a neoliberal understanding of freedom. This negative construal of freedom does not see poverty as a lack of freedom. A person is free when no other human being, group, or institution coerces her. In other words, a person is free when the principle of noninterference is upheld. Moreover, the interference of the state in the economic sphere obviates freedom. The neoliberal conception of freedom also holds that freedom does not require solidarity or any assistance from others. Thus, a poor person is free so long as he or she is left to fend for themselves without interference from others.

This article appeals to Amartya Sen's conception of freedom to argue that, in contradistinction to Leszek Balcerowicz's contention, poverty is tantamount to a lack of human freedom. The article describes Sen's

multifaceted conception of freedom, including the differentiation between instrumental and substantive freedoms, as well as the relationship between them. The relationship among freedoms, as well as Sen's conception of poverty as capability deprivation, illuminates the true nature of poverty, which often negates the ability to achieve substantive freedoms. The article also elucidates how freedom in a free-market economy and democracy constitutes both a goal of development and a path to solidarity. Sen's paradigm also demonstrates that advancing freedom requires solidarity because freedom is in a certain sense a social entity. Sen rightly maintains that the realization of freedom requires solidarity embodied in social institutions, including, at least in some cases, governmental institutions. On the macro scale, Sen's conception of development and freedom reveals the problematic nature of "shock therapy" used in Poland during the initial phase of the social economic transformations after 1989. In this sense, this article situates Sen's thought in

the Polish socioeconomic context, which also reveals the significance of Sen's thought more clearly. Finally, the concluding section of the article points to some similarities (and some differences) between Sen's ideas and Catholic social thought.

**Key words:** Amartya Sen, freedom, poverty, solidarity, neoliberalism, capability approach, Catholic social thought, Polish neoliberalism, "shock therapy"

## Introduction

After the fall of communism in 1989 in Poland, some key decision-makers responsible for the socioeconomic transformations held a neoliberal understanding of freedom.<sup>1</sup> This conception of freedom, also referred to as negative freedom, does not see poverty as a lack of freedom.<sup>2</sup> For example, the architect of Poland's economic transformation Leszek Balcerowicz claimed the following about freedom:

A sensible concept of freedom does not apply to the relationship between a given person and the world of material things. For example, the lack of a bicycle does not attest to the lack of freedom, rather [it points to] relative poverty. This understanding of freedom has very important consequences. It forbids the distortion of it [freedom] under leftist influence, especially Marxist ideologies. They generally defined freedom vis-à-vis the situation of persons to material things and – bringing the problem of poverty into relief – tried to give the impression that in actuality freedom does not exist.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This article expands on my discussion of neoliberalism in Poland and Sen's alternative position in Gerald J. Beyer, *Recovering Solidarity: Lessons from Poland's Unfinished Revolution*, Catholic Social Tradition Series (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010). Permission to reprint excerpts here has been granted by University of Notre Dame Press. Unlike my previous consideration of Sen, this article takes into account his *magnum opus*: Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> I discuss this understanding of freedom more fully in Gerald J. Beyer, „Freedom as a Challenge to an Ethic of Solidarity in a Neoliberal Capitalist World: Lessons from Post-1989 Poland,” *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 6, no. 1 (2009): 133–67.

<sup>3</sup> Translated from the online version of Leszek Balcerowicz, *Wolność i rozwój: ekonomia wolnego rynku* (Kraków: Znak, 2010), 4. Available <http://www.balcerowicz.pl/ksiazki.html>.

Balcerowicz maintains that government intervention in the economic sphere obviates freedom in the same way Marxist systems negated freedom. Just like Marxists, interventionists' ideas are rooted in "the false conflict between economic freedom and economic development." Balcerowicz acknowledges that government intervention may be necessary in certain, limited cases. He mentions governmental efforts to coax industries not to destroy the environment. However, Balcerowicz holds that economic freedom is ultimately constituted by freedom from government intrusion in the economic sphere.<sup>4</sup> Freedom thus understood is a type of negative freedom and should be maximized as much as possible.

Poverty, according to Balcerowicz, may be an undesirable social phenomenon, but it does not constitute a loss of freedom. He has contested this idea and the "statism" it gives rise to among Eastern Europeans and "socialist" Western scholars. For example, in 2003 he delivered a lecture at the World Bank conspicuously entitled "Toward a Limited State."<sup>5</sup> In my judgment, Balcerowicz overlooks the fact that respected free-market economists such as Amartya Sen, who won the Nobel Prize in economics, conceive of poverty as a lack of freedom. Moreover, Catholic social thought, which rejects socialism, also understands poverty as a deprivation of human freedom.

<sup>4</sup> See chapter one in *ibid.* Even though this is the case, his thinking does point to other dimensions of freedom and is more nuanced than many neoliberals.

<sup>5</sup> See Leszek Balcerowicz, "Toward a Limited State," The World Bank Group, Available at [http://www.nbp.pl/aktualnosci/wiadomosci\\_2003/tls.pdf](http://www.nbp.pl/aktualnosci/wiadomosci_2003/tls.pdf). A Polish translation of this article is available at [http://www.balcerowicz.pl/ksiazki/tls\\_en.pdf](http://www.balcerowicz.pl/ksiazki/tls_en.pdf). Balcerowicz states, "If the state justice system is busy enforcing numerous state-imposed restrictions on economic freedom, would it find enough time and motivation to protect adequately what remained of this freedom against intrusions from third parties? It is hard to imagine that a highly regulatory state could—in the long run—have a justice system providing good protection of the remaining economic liberty. In other words, a limited state not only gives individuals the broadest possible economic freedom but also may be able to protect this freedom better than could be the case with much reduced liberty in a highly regulated state."

This article appeals to Amartya Sen's conception of freedom to argue that, in contradistinction to Balcerowicz's contention, poverty is tantamount to a lack of human freedom. The article describes Sen's differentiation between instrumental and substantive freedoms, as well as the relationship between them. Sen's insistence on the relationship among freedoms, as well his conception of poverty as capability deprivation, reveals the true nature of poverty, which often negates the ability to achieve substantive freedoms. The article also elucidates how freedom in a free-market economy and democracy constitutes both a goal of development and a path to solidarity. Sen's paradigm also demonstrates that advancing freedom requires solidarity because freedom is in a certain sense a social entity. The neoliberal conception of freedom incorrectly holds that freedom does not require solidarity (or any assistance from others). A person is free when no other human being, group, or institution coerces her. In other words, a person is free when the principle of noninterference is upheld.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the interference of the state in the economic sphere obviates freedom. However, Sen rightly maintains that the realization of freedom requires solidarity embodied in social institutions, including, at least in some cases, governmental institutions. On the macro scale, Sen's conception of development and freedom reveals the weakness of "shock therapy" used in Poland during the initial phase of the social economic transformations after 1989. In this sense, this article situates Sen's thought in the Polish socioeconomic context in order to demonstrate its significance more clearly. Finally, the concluding section of the article points to the some similarities (and differences) between Sen's ideas and Catholic social thought.

<sup>6</sup> See Beyer, „Freedom as a Challenge to an Ethic of Solidarity in a Neoliberal Capitalist World: Lessons from Post-1989 Poland,” 140.

## Situating Sen

Amartya Sen cannot be deemed a socialist. He has clearly argued that human freedoms are best fostered within a free market economic system.<sup>7</sup> Sen's work positions him among the most important liberal philosophers of recent decades, even if some have maintained that he espouses "leftist" ideas.<sup>8</sup> Like John Rawls and most modern liberal philosophers, Sen purports to espouse an understanding of justice founded above all on "the kinds of lives we have reason to value," not a preconceived notion of human nature or the good.<sup>9</sup> Revealing his commitment to an anti-foundationalist approach to ethics, Sen states "... the freedom to determine the nature of our lives is one of the valued aspects of living that we have reason to treasure."<sup>10</sup> Only widespread political dialogue and democratic consensus can create just social arrangements; they cannot be imposed by benevolent political authorities even if they will improve the some aspects of the populace's well-being.<sup>11</sup> Sen prizes agency, the aspect of freedom which he defines as the ability to "act and bring about change ... as a participant in economic, social and political

<sup>7</sup> See Amartya Kumar Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 1st. ed. (New York: Knopf, 1999), 6, 25–30, 111–45.

<sup>8</sup> See for example Wojciech Gasparski, „Kwestia bogactwa i ubóstwa w literaturze przedmiotu,” in *Etyczne aspekty bogactwa się i ubóstwa*, ed. Adam Węgrzecki (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Akademii Ekonomicznej w Krakowie, 2003), 17.

<sup>9</sup> Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 284–85. Michael Sandel discusses this view as a characteristic feature of liberalism in Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

<sup>10</sup> Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 227.

<sup>11</sup> Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 31–2, 269 and Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 295–96, 304–09. In a public lecture given at the Boston Research Institute in 2000, Sen maintained that environmentally friendly legislation should not be created if it is against the will of the people in the United States, even if it would stem environmental destruction. On Sen's reluctance to impose legislative measures upon societies in order to protect human rights, see also Martha Craven Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 12–13. I will discuss this issue again in the concluding section.

actions.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the “freedom to choose our lives” is valuable in itself, and “it is ultimately for us to decide how to use the freedom we have.”<sup>13</sup> In short, Sen’s thinking exhibits many of the hallmarks of liberalism.<sup>14</sup>

In addition, Sen unambiguously dismisses the Marxist notion that freedom from material deprivation primarily constitutes true freedom, a view that the Polish parliamentarian and economist Józef Kaleta advocated in Poland after the fall of Communism.<sup>15</sup> According to Sen, poor individuals in countries as India, Bangladesh, Thailand, and Burma equally value the freedom to participate in the political process and freedom from hunger.<sup>16</sup> However, unlike neoliberals, Sen does not maintain that freedom primarily amounts to the right to dispose of one’s income without coercive interference from the government. Contrary to both Marxist and neoliberal perspectives, Sen argues that human freedom has “irreducibly multiple elements” and that one freedom cannot be deemed more essential among the array of important human freedoms.<sup>17</sup> Sen’s capacious understanding of freedom includes the “opportunity” and “process” aspects of freedom, “substantive” and “instrumental” freedoms, and the “agency” and “well-being” aspects of

<sup>12</sup> Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 19.

<sup>13</sup> Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 18–9. See also 301.

<sup>14</sup> I derive my understanding of liberalism here largely from Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* and Jerzy Szacki, *Liberalism after Communism* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1995).

<sup>15</sup> See Józef Kaleta, „Plusy i minusy,” in *Spór o Polskę: 1989–1999*, ed. Paweł Śpiewak (Warszawa: PWN, 2001), 655. For Marx’s perspective of freedom, see Karl Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Programme” in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup>. Ed. (New York: W.W. Norton), 530–31. Here Marx speaks rather of rights than freedoms, but he clearly implies economic deprivation is a lack of freedom. An excellent overview of Marx’s understanding of freedom is Andrzej Walicki, „Marx and Freedom,” *New York Review of Books*, November 24, 1983: 50–55.

<sup>16</sup> Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 151–52.

<sup>17</sup> Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 308–9; see also 228–9, 301–09, 70–1. He also refers to the “plural features of freedom” (*The Idea of Justice*, 301) and the „heterogeneity of distinct components of freedom” in Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 33, see also 292.

freedom.<sup>18</sup> His notion of freedom encompasses what has been called “positive” and “negative” freedom, even if he sparingly applies these terms to his thinking.<sup>19</sup> Given space limitations, this article will not be able to address all facets of Sen’s complex conception of freedom, which according to Balcerowicz “obscures the meaning of freedom.”<sup>20</sup> For the purpose of the argument here, it will suffice to elaborate on four of Sen’s basic points concerning freedom:

- 1) The expansion of freedom constitutes the “primary end” and the “principle means of development”<sup>21</sup>;
- 2) Freedom must be conceived “in a sufficiently broad way,” which sees the “empirical linkages” between the diverse kinds of freedoms that persons either enjoy or lack;
- 3) Poverty is best understood as “capability deprivation,” which constitutes a lack of freedom.
- 4) A reciprocal relationship exists between individual freedom and social commitments that make attaining individual freedom feasible.

<sup>18</sup> On the opportunity and process aspects of freedom, see Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 228–9, 370–1; Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 290–2; *On Ethics and Economics* (Oxford Blackwell, 1987), 58–61. On “agency” and “well-being” freedom, see Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 286–90, 97–8 and Sen, *On Ethics and Economics*, 58–64. In *The Idea of Justice*, Sen also refers to the agency aspect of freedom as “effective freedom” (301–2).

<sup>19</sup> Sen is certainly aware of these terms. See *The Idea of Justice*, 282 and Sen, *On Ethics and Economics*, 56–7. This article will reveal that aspects of his idea of freedom cohere with both positive and negative freedom. For a more extensive discussion of this distinction and its flaws, see Beyer, „Freedom as a Challenge to an Ethic of Solidarity in a Neoliberal Capitalist World: Lessons from Post-1989 Poland,” 140–2.

<sup>20</sup> Leszek Balcerowicz, “Toward a Limited State,” *Cato Journal*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Fall 2004): 188. This is a revised version of the speech quoted above in note five.

<sup>21</sup> Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 36.

## The Relationship between Freedoms and Development

Polish neoliberals deemed the social costs of the Polish social economic transformations after 1989, such as dramatic rises in unemployment and poverty, as the price to be paid for economic growth, the goal of development.<sup>22</sup> Sen has argued against kind of development approach, which has unfortunately represented the dominant paradigm for some time in his view. According to Sen, a development approach that postpones “substantive freedoms” until a certain level of economic growth (in terms of GDP) has been attained is misguided.<sup>23</sup> Sen elaborates on “substantive” and “instrumental” freedoms in making his case. He defines substantive freedoms as those freedoms that people have reason to value for their own sake. Such freedoms also constitute the “ends” of development (as opposed to economic growth solely measured in terms of GDP). Among the substantive freedoms Sen lists are the following: “the capability of avoiding deprivations such as starvation, undernourishment, morbidity and premature mortality, freedoms associated with being literate and numerate, enjoying political participation and uncensored speech, and so on.”<sup>24</sup> Sen’s development paradigm conceives of freedoms such as the capability of political participation and the opportunity to pursue education or health care needs as “constituent components” (both goals and means) of development.<sup>25</sup> Such freedoms should not be valued purely in instrumental terms, in other words to the degree that they foster to “economic growth.” Conversely, Sen maintains that development

<sup>22</sup> See Gerald J. Beyer, *Recovering Solidarity: Lessons from Poland’s Unfinished Revolution* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 1,5,14–15 and Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 225, 39. Sen similarly criticizes the reductionist emphasis on utility of welfare economics, while overlooking agency, freedoms, and rights. See Sen, *On Ethics and Economics*, 40–61

<sup>24</sup> *Development as Freedom*, 36. See also 16–17. Sen states that this is not an exhaustive list.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 5, see also 18, 35–53.



should be measured by the degree to which such freedoms are expanded.<sup>26</sup>

Historical evidence has shown, however, that freedoms such as literacy and the opportunity to have health care have contributed to economic growth, construed in terms of GDP. Early on in their economic boom, Japan, then, undertook a large-scale expansion of education, then health care and other “social opportunities” early on in their rise to economic success. Other East Asian economies, such as South Korea, later successfully followed this approach. It has also generated economic growth and decreased poverty in Kerala, India.<sup>27</sup> Balcerowicz emphasizes that capitalism represents a necessary precondition for democracy, arguing that democratic freedoms cannot exist within a socialist economic system. He further states that economic freedom can exist without democracy, at least over some period of time.<sup>28</sup> Thus, Balcerowicz downplays the importance democratic freedoms for development. Sen on the other hand stresses that democratic participation represents both an end and a means of development.<sup>29</sup> A discussion of the category of instrumental freedoms will further reveal the contours of Sen’s argument.

As Sen puts it, instrumental freedoms “tend to contribute to the general capability of a person to live more freely” and “serve to complement one another.” Instrumental freedoms serve as the “means” to development and include: political freedoms (the ability to determine who should govern and according to what principles, uncensored press, etc.), economic facilities (such as access to credit) social

<sup>26</sup> Likewise, these freedoms should be seen as valuable independently of utility. Ultimately, they tell us more about the quality of life according to Sen. See Sen, *On Ethics and Economics*, 29–65; Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 57–85 and Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 281–90.

<sup>27</sup> Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 41.

<sup>28</sup> Leszek Balcerowicz, *Wolność i rozwój: ekonomia wolnego rynku*, 8. See also Leszek Balcerowicz, *Państwo w przebudowie* (Kraków: Znak, 2010), 26. Available at [http://www.balcerowicz.pl/pliki/artykuly/4\\_panstwo\\_w\\_przebudowie.pdf](http://www.balcerowicz.pl/pliki/artykuly/4_panstwo_w_przebudowie.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 146–59.

opportunities (arrangements for education and health care, etc.) transparency guarantees (the freedom to deal with one another under the “guarantee of disclosure and lucidity”) and protective security (institutionalized protection against abject poverty, hunger and death, i.e. a social safety net).<sup>30</sup> These freedoms enhance substantive freedoms that people value “but they also supplement one another and can furthermore reinforce one another.”<sup>31</sup> For example, educational achievements influence whether or not one can exercise the ability to participate in civic life and have one’s voice taken into consideration. The “unfreedom” of illiteracy creates barriers to the full exercise of political freedoms. In Sen’s words, “political participation may be hindered by the inability to read newspapers or communicate effectively with others involved in political activities.” Illiteracy can hinder or preclude participating in the global economy, which more and more demands skills needed for “specification in the production process and strict quality control.”<sup>32</sup> In short, economic freedoms, such as freedom from starvation, and political freedoms, such as the right to vote, are intrinsically interrelated. Sen’s conclusions about the interconnections of freedoms suggests that the vaunted neoliberal development scheme of “the economy first, then everything else” is inherently mistaken. According to Sen, development should primarily focus on the expansion of real human freedoms, subsequently leading to economic growth.

### **Poverty as a Lack of Freedom**

Sen’s understanding of freedom has significant ramifications for poverty analysis and for public policy.<sup>33</sup> Sen views poverty as “capability deprivation,” not merely lack of income (as many poverty in-

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 38–40.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>33</sup> Sen holds that while the capability approach does not “propose any specific formula for policy decisions” it can have real implications. Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 232–3.

dices do). Poverty understood as capability deprivation may arise from income poverty but it entails something deeper, namely the inability to enjoy substantive freedoms. Sen traces the roots of this idea to the ancient words of Aristotle, who claimed “wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking, for it is merely useful and for the sake of something else.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, wealth and income have no intrinsic value. Rather, wealth and income are valuable to the extent that they can be converted into capabilities.<sup>35</sup> Capabilities are “functionings” that persons wish to attain and may realistically do so in practice. Functionings represent “those things a person may value doing or being,” such as escaping avoidable morbidity and obtaining adequate nutrition. Thus understood, capability constitutes a vital kind of freedom: “the substantive freedom to achieve alternative functioning combinations,” or more simply stated, “...the freedom to achieve various lifestyles.” To put it another way, substantive freedoms are the “capabilities to choose a life one has reason to value.”<sup>36</sup> For example, if a person values the functioning of reading and writing, but lacks the capability of reading and writing, she is denied the substantive freedom – that is, real opportunity – of achieving literacy. Sen lucidly summarizes his understanding of the capability approach in *The Idea of Justice*:

...individual advantage is judged in the capability approach by a person’s capability to do things he or she has reason to value. A person’s advantage in terms of opportunities is judged to be lower than that of another if she has less capability – less real opportunity – to achieve those things that she has reason to value. The focus here is on the freedom that a person actually has to do this or be that – things that he or she may value doing or being.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. D. Ross, revised edition ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 7, book I, section 6. Cited in Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 289.

<sup>35</sup> See Sen *Development as Freedom*, 73 and Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 253–57.

<sup>36</sup> Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 74–75.

<sup>37</sup> Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 231–2. At times, Sen unnecessarily obfuscates the relationship between capabilities and freedom. For example, he sometimes states that notion of capabil-

The following example elucidates the relationship between functionings, capabilities, and freedom. An Afghani woman living under the Taliban did not have the functioning of political participation within her capability set; the Taliban refused to allow women to be involved in politics.<sup>38</sup> She may have wanted to be active politically, which means she values the functioning of political participation, but was not a real possibility for her (at least not without severe repercussions, including execution). In other words, she did not possess the “substantive freedom” of political participation, to use Sen’s terminology. In a reasonably democratically governed nation, a person may opt not to politically participate, for one reason or another, such as disillusionment with the nation’s leaders, political parties, etc. This person and an Afghan woman under Taliban rule have the same “functioning achievement,” meaning they both do not vote and eschew political discourse. However, the person in a democracy has a different capability set, a “wider” one. Although she or he *chooses* not to politically participate, this individual nonetheless retains the substantive freedom of political participation, which she or he may choose to exercise at any point. Succinctly stated, an individual’s capability set is comprised of the freedom to achieve various functionings, such as literacy, being adequately nourished, taking part in the civic life of the community, etc. However, having a particular capability set does not yet convey whether or not a person “actualizes” the freedoms within his or her capability set.<sup>39</sup>

According to Sen’s paradigm, the interconnections of freedoms may complicate or qualify the above comparison of an Afghan wom-

ity is „linked with” substantive freedom (253) or “linked closely with the opportunity aspect of freedom” (232). This implies that freedom and capability form a unity among two discrete parts. However, it appears that what Sen actually means is that “capability is ... one aspect of freedom, related to substantive opportunities...” (295).

<sup>38</sup> See <http://www.amnesty.org.uk/womens-rights-afghanistan-history#.U-0C9vldV7g>. Amnesty International notes that repression against women still exists in many parts of Afghanistan.

<sup>39</sup> Sen argues it is important to look beyond achievements to opportunities. Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 235–38. See also Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 75.

an under the Taliban and a citizen in a democratic nation. The comparison of their situations (i.e. their respective capability sets) holds only if the person who voluntarily chooses not to participate in the political life of the community is not inhibited by the lack of other important freedoms.<sup>40</sup> The fact that the second person (living in a democracy) has the formal right to vote and politically participate (in debate, campaigning, lobbying, etc.) does not necessarily ensure that she or he remains substantively free to do so. At a minimum, a citizen of a democracy may not possess the freedom to politically participate to the same degree and with the same likelihood of effectively promoting her interests and rights as other citizens. As John Rawls has argued in *A Theory of Justice*, when a democracy permits large inequalities of wealth and property to exist, all people do not possess the same “fair value of political liberty”:

Political power rapidly accumulates and becomes unequal; and making use of the coercive apparatus of the state and its law, those who gain the advantage can often assure themselves of a favored position. Thus inequities in the economic and social system may soon undermine whatever political equality might have existed under fortunate historical circumstances.<sup>41</sup>

According to Rawls, private ownership, the means of production, property, and wealth must be “widely distributed” in a democracy in order to preserve the fair value of political liberties. This is the case for two reasons. First, those with wealth and resources have an unfair advantage in terms of their greater likelihood of influencing politicians and political parties, whose campaigns are privately financed. This advantage can and does often translate into more opportunity for wealthy individuals and groups to advance their interests by influencing legislators who may pass laws favorable to their interests. In addition, they have a greater

<sup>40</sup> See *Development as Freedom*, 40; Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 233.

<sup>41</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 199.

opportunity to promote their interests and agendas by controlling the media.<sup>42</sup>

Rawls' thinking resembles Sen's contention that one kind of freedom often conditions the ability to exercise other kinds of freedom, positively or negatively.<sup>43</sup> Thus, a poor or marginalized person in a democracy may formally possess the ability to participate politically, but may not in reality possess this substantive freedom due to certain constraints. In order to illustrate how freedoms are inter-related, Sen recounts a horrific encounter from his childhood in Dhaka (presently in Bangladesh). He recalls how an impoverished Muslim man named Kader died from being stabbed in the back in Sen's predominantly Hindu neighborhood. While Sen gave him water, Kader Mia said that his wife had warned him not to go there as it was dangerous for Muslims. However, he was forced to do so out of economic necessity. He was desperately looking for work. In reflecting on this encounter, Sen opines

...economic unfreedom, in the form of extreme poverty, can make a person a helpless prey in the violation of other kinds of freedom. Kader Mia need not have come to a hostile area in search of a little income in those terrible times had his family been able to survive without it. Economic unfreedom can breed social unfreedom, just as social or political unfreedom can also foster economic unfreedom.<sup>44</sup>

In Sen's paradigm, poverty is tantamount to a lack of freedom (or, a state of unfreedom) when lack of income leads to the inability to "achieve the same elementary functionings as others."<sup>45</sup> It is important to understand that for Sen, low income itself does not

<sup>42</sup> My reading of Rawls on this point is indebted to Norman Daniels, „Equal Liberty and Unequal Worth of Liberty,” in Norman Daniels, ed., *Reading Rawls: Critical Studies on Rawls' a Theory of Justice* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1989), 256–57.

<sup>43</sup> Sen expresses his affinity for much of Rawls's thinking, but also describes how his own ideas clearly depart from Rawls. See especially Sen, *The Idea of Justice*.

<sup>44</sup> Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 8.

<sup>45</sup> Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 255.

equate with poverty. Rather, Sen defines poverty as a deprivation of capabilities, which are “intrinsically important.”<sup>46</sup> Sen does not discount low income as “one of the major causes of poverty.” However, income is *instrumentally* important, as low income can be a “principal reason for a person’s capability deprivation.” Among these intrinsically important capabilities are the ability to avoid starvation, undernourishment, escapable morbidity and premature mortality, having literacy and numeracy, political participation and free speech.<sup>47</sup> Lacking any of these capabilities is tantamount to poverty, which in turn is a lack of substantive freedom.

From the perspective of poverty as capability deprivation, what a person needs in order to possess certain freedoms will differ from one society to another. The ability or inability to convert income (or resources more generally) into capabilities (and freedom) depends on a whole host of personal, social, environmental and political factors, such as age, gender, race, disability, proneness to illness, climactic and environmental conditions, public health care, and cultural and communal behavioral norms.<sup>48</sup> In addition, a person’s situation relative to other persons in society matters: “being relatively poor in a rich community can prevent a person from achieving some elementary “functionings” (such as taking part in the life of the community) even though her income, in absolute terms, may be much higher than the level of income at which members of poorer communities can function with greater ease and success.”<sup>49</sup> In other words, the freedom to avoid marginalization is likely to re-

<sup>46</sup> Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 87.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 36, 74–75. Although it has resisted at times, Sen’s thinking has influenced the World Bank. The 2000 World Bank report advocates an approach that acknowledges poverty’s many dimensions, including low levels of income and consumption, low achievements in health and education, vulnerability, risk, voicelessness and powerlessness. See S. M. Ravi Kanbur, Nora Lustig, and World Bank, *Attacking Poverty*, World Development Report, 2000/2001 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), esp. 15.

<sup>48</sup> Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 254–5. See also Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 70–1.

<sup>49</sup> Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 71. Sen notes that Adam Smith pointed out this obvious fact in *The Wealth of Nations*. See also Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 256–7.

quire more income in order to attain certain commodities needed for achieving the “same social functioning.” Therefore, Sen contends that “relative deprivation in terms of incomes can yield absolute deprivation in terms of capabilities.”<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, those who experience deprivations of certain capabilities may also encounter a “coupling of disadvantages.”<sup>51</sup> For example, disability or illness, make it harder to earn income. In addition, a disabled or sick person will likely need more income than a healthy person in order to “convert income into capability.”<sup>52</sup> In short, poverty takes many forms, as does unfreedom, as do their causes. In this regard, Sen would contend that Balcerowicz’s claim that not having a bicycle does not make a person unfree fails to recognize that lacking certain commodities may lead to unfreedom. If not having a bicycle, or computer in many of our digitally wired societies, precludes achieving the same social functioning as others (i.e. it limits the agent’s opportunities), it should be seen as a denial of freedom.<sup>53</sup> Material poverty is not the only cause of unfreedom. One can be unfree even if she has a bicycle, or a computer, if either of those goods were given to her by a dictator who denies her political freedoms, for example. This would constitute a denial of the “process aspect of freedom.”<sup>54</sup> Nonetheless, material poverty can be a real and debilitating cause of unfreedom. Material deprivations such as hunger, starvation, illness etc. should not be deemed any less threatening to human freedom than the denial of civil liberties and other kinds of freedom.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 256.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. See also Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 114.

<sup>52</sup> Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 256. On disability and capabilities, see *ibid.*, 258–60. For discussion of racism impeding the ability to convert income of the capabilities, see Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 21–24.

<sup>53</sup> See *Development as Freedom*, 74 and Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 256.

<sup>54</sup> Sen equally emphasizes the “process aspect of freedom” and the “opportunity” aspect, denials of which generate unfreedom. See Sen *The Idea of Justice*, 228–9, 95–98.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 300.



## **“No Freedom without Solidarity”: The Social Dimensions of Freedom according to Sen**

Sen also contends the freedom of the individual is “quintessentially a social product.”<sup>56</sup> In this vein, Sen’s thinking resembles the axiom of the *Solidarność* movement “no freedom without solidarity,” which was repeated by Pope John Paul II.<sup>57</sup> Like Rawls, Sen argues that the freedom of individuals depends upon the existence of social institutions that protect it. In other words, the realization of freedom requires social solidarity. Individuals must in turn use their freedom to make social institutions more effective in protecting freedom.<sup>58</sup> In other words, individual freedom must promote social arrangements that embody the principle of solidarity. In the framework of Catholic social thought, solidarity can be understood as the use of one’s freedom to promote the freedom, participation, and rights of others.<sup>59</sup> Sen does not refer to solidarity *per se*, nor does he explicitly underscore the link between freedom and solidarity. However, he argues that having freedom, or the opportunity to choose what to do, generates “responsibility for what we do.” According to Sen, “since a capability is the power to do something, the accountability that emanates from that ability – that power – is a part of the capability perspective, and this can make room for demands of duty – what can be broadly called the deontological demands.”<sup>60</sup>

Contrary to rational choice theory, Sen persuasively argues that rationality can at least permit the altruistic desire to help others. He admits, however, that reason alone cannot obligate one to use one’s freedom for the sake of others.<sup>61</sup> Alternatively, he argues that

<sup>56</sup> Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 31.

<sup>57</sup> See John Paul II, *Jan Paweł II: Polska 1999: Przemowienia I Homilie* (Marki: Michalineum, 1999), 106. John Paul uses the word solidarity (*solidarność*) in reference to the principle, value, or virtue, not the *Solidarność* movement *per se*.

<sup>58</sup> See Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 31 and Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 198–200.

<sup>59</sup> See Beyer, *Recovering Solidarity: Lessons from Poland’s Unfinished Revolution*, 86, 105–8.

<sup>60</sup> Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 19.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

if a person has the power to undertake an action that will lead to more justice in the world, she has the duty to diligently consider doing it. In his view, the modern human rights movement is grounded in this kind of moral reasoning. In addition, Tom Paine and Mary Wollstonecraft both argued for the “freedoms – and, correspondingly, human rights – of all” on the basis of “reasoning about the obligation of effective power to help advance the freedoms of all.”<sup>62</sup> In other words, having capabilities, or substantive freedoms, gives rise to the duty to promote the freedoms of others, when possible. An asymmetry of power should cause us to recognize “our fiduciary responsibility” to those who suffer from deprivations.<sup>63</sup> Sen’s argument echoes the ethic of solidarity in Catholic social thought, which holds that all human beings are obligated to promote the freedoms and rights of others, although the grounding for the argument clearly differs in Sen’s non-foundationalist approach.<sup>64</sup> Nonetheless, Sen’s understanding of freedom is not as radically individualistic as has been sometimes claimed; it points toward the use of freedom in solidarity.<sup>65</sup> In Sen’s words, “we’re not only ‘patients’ whose

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 205–7; 51. 251

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 251; see also 372–3.

<sup>64</sup> For a fuller explication of solidarity in Catholic social thought, see Beyer, *Recovering Solidarity: Lessons from Poland’s Unfinished Revolution* and Gerald J. Beyer, „The Meaning of Solidarity in Catholic Social Teaching,” *Political Theology* 14, no. 1 (2014). I find Sen’s attempt to articulate a non-foundationalist account of the duty to promote the rights and freedoms of all (the exercise of solidarity in Catholic thought) ultimately unpersuasive. He fails to convincingly articulate why anyone should recognize a necessary relationship between the power to do something and the duty to do it. I argue for the cogency of the Catholic rights/duties framework, which is rooted in the social nature of the human person, in „Economic Rights: Past, Present, and Future,” in *Handbook of Human Rights*, ed. Thomas Cushman (London ; New York: Routledge, 2012). I do not agree with Ron Sider, and others, who argue that we need an explicitly theistic account to undergird duties to others. However, I argue for a natural law foundation, which is something Sen eschews. See Ron Sider, „Development as Freedom,” *First Things* (2001).

<sup>65</sup> Sider characterizes Sen’s understanding of freedom as individualistic in *Development as Freedom*. Sen has addressed critics of his putative “methodological individualism.” He states that his approach, which values “a person’s ability to take part in the life of the soci-

needs deserve consideration, but also ‘agents,’ whose freedom to decide what to value and how to pursue what we value can extend far beyond their own interests and needs.”<sup>66</sup>

Does Sen’s call to solidarity with those who experience unfreedoms, in other words those who are marginalized, necessitate government intervention, the bugaboo of neoliberals like Balcerowicz? Like the perspective on the fulfillment of economic rights according to subsidiarity in Catholic social thought, Sen’s thinking cuts through the debate about the loss of individual responsibility when social institutions “overstep their bounds” and provide myriad economic, social and cultural goods, thereby creating a “culture of dependency.” Detractors of the welfare state, such as Polish neoliberals, and those who deny the existence of economic rights, have often made this criticism.<sup>67</sup> In response to this argument, Sen rightly maintains that “responsibility requires freedom.”<sup>68</sup> In order for individuals to contribute to the construction of a just social order (i.e. one that fosters the substantive freedoms of all) they must possess the substantive freedoms (capabilities) needed to responsibly participate in this social and political role. Thus, numerous social, political, and economic arrangements must exist so that persons can reasonably be expected to do their part in the maintenance of a just society. Thus, the state and society cannot eschew responsibility for shaping the social order if we want to promote the freedoms of individuals.<sup>69</sup> The “shared responsibility of society” creates the conditions for the possibility of individual freedom and respon-

ety,” contains “an implicit valuation of the life of the society itself.” See Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 244–7.

<sup>66</sup> Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 252.

<sup>67</sup> See Michael Novak, „The Rights and Wrongs of „Economic Rights”: A Debate Continued,” *This World* 17, no. Spring (1987): 43, 45. In addition to the many Polish neoliberal perspectives cited above, see also Waław Wilczyński’s piece on the “enemy welfare state.” Waław Wilczyński, „Wrogi państwo opiekuncze,” in *Wrogi państwo opiekuncze czyli trudna droga Polski do gospodarki rynkowej* (Warszawa: Wydaw. Naukowe PWN, 1999).

<sup>68</sup> Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 284.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 283–88.

sibility.<sup>70</sup> For example, a person who lacks the means to escape preventable illness and disease “may also be denied the freedom to do various things – for herself and others – that she may wish to do as a responsible human being” according to Sen.<sup>71</sup> In order for her, and all people similarly deprived, to achieve the freedom from preventable illness, which in turn prevents her from using her freedom for the sake of others, forms of “institutionalized solidarity” will need to empower her.<sup>72</sup> According to Sen, some freedoms are of such “critical importance” that they should be recognized as human rights with corresponding societal obligations.<sup>73</sup> Promoting those human freedoms deemed to be rights does not always require legislation and governmental action. However, these “routes” to promoting human rights can be necessary and complementary to others, such as NGO activity, public advocacy, charitable assistance, etc.<sup>74</sup>

To summarize, persons who are “poor” according to income standards may lack multiple important freedoms in Sen’s paradigm. In other words, their capability set, or the functionings they may achieve, may be limited due to their lack of income. Seen in this perspective, poverty becomes more than just a lack of income. Poverty is limitation of human freedom, as Pope John Paul II argued in his encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*. According to John Paul, the global economy permits some to “abuse their freedom” by pursuing excessive profits and material gain at the expense of many whose freedom is constrained as a result of poverty and systematic marginalization.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 288.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 284.

<sup>72</sup> On institutionalization of solidarity, see David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 159–65, 90–3 and Beyer, *Recovering Solidarity: Lessons from Poland’s Unfinished Revolution*, 99–105.

<sup>73</sup> According to Sen, not all freedoms should be seen as human rights. Sen delineates criteria for determining whether or not certain freedoms should be considered human rights. See Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 357, 66–87.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 361–66; see also 232–3 and Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 269.

<sup>75</sup> John Paul II, „Redemptor Hominis,” Vatican website, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_04031979\\_redemptor-hominis\\_](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_04031979_redemptor-hominis_)

While there are certainly differences in their understandings of freedom, Sen and Catholic social thought share the supposition that freedom does not mean being left alone.<sup>76</sup> A purely negative construal of freedom of this sort deems impoverished people free as long as they are left to fend for themselves, even if being left along leads to starvation, illness, or death. The Catholic human rights framework sees poverty as an assault against the freedom of the poor because it threatens their human dignity. This is the case because poverty precludes the fulfillment of the right to participation and the other rights necessary for participation in the common good. Moreover, poverty stems from a lack of solidarity, as solidarity fosters the freedom and participation of all.<sup>77</sup> Sen's important voice amplifies Catholic thought on these issues by showing with philosophical and empirical sophistication how poverty is indeed a lack of freedom. He has also corrected the erroneous and dangerous neoliberal assumption that economic growth constitutes human development.

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<sup>76</sup> Hollenbach makes a similar argument against “freedom to be left alone,” appealing to Taylor rather than Sen in Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*, 67–78.

<sup>77</sup> See Ibid and Beyer, *Recovering Solidarity*.

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