

# From Welfare to Well-being: new approaches for a good life

Maria Antonietta Selvaggio, Prof.Dr

Researcher in Sociology and professor in Social Research and Methodology  
University of Salerno, Italy

## Abstract

In this paper we reflect on some analysis conducted by researchers as Laura Balbo, Mary Catherine Bateson and Martha Nussbaum who, although having not had direct relations among them or specific partnerships, have greatly contributed to elaborate concepts and categories regarding our new vision of the well-being.

This concept, so dear to the economist Amartya Sen, draws nourishment from thoughts and lived belonging to women's life experience, particularly as concerning their capacity to organize their daily and family life, taking care of others, shouldering the vulnerabilities and building their biographical paths with creativity and adaptation. So we can understand what is a good life through the realization of our abilities, that is of each person, and not using a utility calculation.

This involves a new approach to life quality and human development, that is exactly the capabilities approach described by Sen, rehashed by Nussbaum but, for some aspects, it was already present into the studies which characterize the gender prospective.

**Keywords:** care; well-being; capability; good life

*Obviously, the approach concerning the capabilities gives us normes for the human development in general, and not only for women's development. Women's issues, anyway, don't merit a particular attention, only for their extraordinary urgency. These problems help us to see clearly the inadequacy of different approaches to our development and locate the causes to prefer the capabilities approach.\**

## Introduction

In this paper I aim at reflecting on the social transformation from *welfare* to *well-being* considering in particular some aspects concerning the theoretical production of three great female authors: the sociologist Laura Balbo, the anthropologist and language expert Mary Catherine Bateson and the philosopher Martha Nussbaum.

These three scholars have emphasized as important points of their work the concept and the dimension concerning the *care*, declining it in the different daily life spheres,

---

\* Marta C. Nussbaum, *Giustizia sociale e dignità umana. Da individui a persone*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2002, p. 94.

services, family and social organization, but also to the higher institutional levels and in the international relations sector.

Using original contributions these three female authors show that to answer people needs are important those real-lives and a knowledge that for long time have been left in the private sphere. This matter, already crucial in the paths concerning feminist and gender studies until their birth, has concussed the dichotomous paradigm “public/private”, that is the basis of the dominant social and political structure up to now. All this leads towards prospective of *re-composition* (Bateson), *conciliation* according to the patchwork metaphor (Balbo) and *good life* (Nussbaum). In this new theoretical framework asserts a deep revision concerning the concept of social justice. On this point the critics made by Martha Nussbaum becomes relevant. She criticizes the liberal thought and its contractualist paradigm. Her admonition is: no objectives of equity could be reached until people diverge from the vision that the citizen coincides with the adult able contractor figure. This leads to believe, also at a common level knowledge, that the substance of ourselves consists in being auto-sufficient. The postulate of the auto-sufficiency takes people in an inevitable way to accept that who is not auto-sufficient can legitimately keep on being considered a load. Thus the measures to support him/her are too much expensive for society which not always can sustains. By overturning the abstraction of this postulate causes the necessity to assume into the social justice doctrine the idea of the vulnerability as not exceptional condition, but the basis of every human being and thus it is decisive to make public policies to solve male and female citizens’ necessities.

### **New words**

It seems opportune to revisit those analyses that in the gender studies, already some decades ago, emphasized some issues concerning a new conception of job, daily life, times life quality, individual training and care activities. By putting in evidence issues as times and care (and of their own connexions) as questions that don’t exclusively involve women, families, daily life, private life, but are crucial for the structural and institutional organization level concerning our society operating, constitutes the value of those studies and researches.

*«At the beginning of Seventies, - says Laura Balbo - at the university of Milan, we promoted courses about “the female condition”, with the full support of the union trade. It was not granted. At that time, what were the gender studies was not clear to anyone (and for long time the women’s studies were considered in the Italian intellectual landscape as a segregated experience, a sector for specialists and at the edge).*

*We were all women with the same age, workers, employers, active in policies. We were almost all between thirty and forty years, brooded and with families, who lived in a city as Milan was. There were problems concerning the suburbs, the transports times, the inadequate services. At the beginning a low number of them attended the courses, while it was high the number of those who abandoned them. Thus we organized our work according women's yokes and time, to better answer their exigencies. We focused themes that for their study and the sacrifice they did for a new organization of their own lives, had a sense. We did auto-analysis and co-research experiences.*

*The number of the courses concerning the women's condition and the number of the attenders grew as we moved forward. So we learnt the knowledge on the "female condition" and the new words which described the adult women, their double presence (paid work and domestic-family work), the working.» (Balbo 2008: 43).*

Laura Balbo's experience suggests also the ethical-political esteem about a methodological choice which generated knowledge from a direct dialogue and the mutual change between the expert knowledge and life one. In this process relations and transfers crossed, the key concepts effloresced in the information and real-lives change. By taking in mind our nowadays reality - inside the academy and into the Social Sciences - we should welcome her purpose without hesitations:

*«Today it should be useful to come back on this theme in the university contest: as didactic praxes and research paths could (must?) proceed together, with mutual influences. A university that reflects and modifies itself, that organizes its structure in the scenery of knowledge society and lifelong learning: we could pick continuity elements up between the past experiences of those years (almost forgotten and deleted) and the pressing and urgent reflections concerning our present and future?» (ibid. 42).*

By focusing our research on people's deep exigencies has permitted to discover the time cruciality about the individual and collective existence quality, considering time like a central bend both in producing the inequalities and their transcendence. We have to consider time for a lifelong learning as we call our learning today. And the reflection on this kind of learning characterizes, it is not a case, Laura Balbo's more recent reflection: the «reading key» of our present and future which waits for us. Beyond the negative feel which has distinguished until now the analyses on the modernity, as we experiment it today – in *risk* term as Ulrich Beck does, or *liquidity* according Zigmunt Bauman's language -, Balbo suggests a different and positive prospective, based on the lifelong learning as a «biographical auto-construction mechanism concerning the social actor» and capabilities «to built and re-built all the environment around the individual» (ibid. 134). This thought is connected in a coherent way to all the past sociological production, in effect we can consider it as the more mature exit of that path.

Today we understand clearly the fecundity of gender prospective in recalling the attention on adult women's capabilities, marked by their *double presence*, to link and combine different world, taking them in the daily life also inventing and improvising solution. We understand today more than yesterday that the promise concerning the systems equity in the welfare can't realize without passing through two essential bends: the asymmetry transcendence among genders into the distribution of roles and resources and the female competences evaluation into the well-being organization, starting from the biographical paths built as crazy quilts.

On this aspect we must remember Mary Catherine Bateson's thought. In the preface to her Italian edition *Composing a life* she asserts:

*«the distinctive character of our contemporary life is the change. [...] More various elements are borrowed and mixed, and what we decide to preserve abides thus some modifications, receiving new meaning attributions from its collocation in a new contest. So everywhere men and women are always busy in a creative process concerning their own lives composition» (1992: 7).*

And, by surveying five different way to compose our own life through long and empathic conversations with five American women, it shows the richness in combining creatively *improvisation* and *adaptation*. The basic idea which leads this happy theoretical and narrative operation is: in our modern society the individuals – women and men – could rely less and less on tested pattern and conventional life scheme. Nevertheless they should be able to re-compose the various «pieces», inventing «new scheme» (ibid. 9). By refusing to recognize this date means to deny our world complexity. A world in which the temptation to simplify is insidiously present, and it is often hidden in inadequate categories when we want to define and measure people's well-being.

From this angle, women's life gives us a complex model, but also it is able to indicate righteous solutions, as explained in the following words: «From women's life we can take valid models by virtue of the pressing that makes it seem more difficult. People have not permitted women to concentrate on a unique aim, thus they have been living in an ambiguous and odd way.

It is a no easy question, but the rejection of the ambiguity can be translated in the rejection of the real world complexity to favor a competitive model that is dangerously simple. When a country enters the war, it has to shift no more for a balance research between the butter and the cannons: this is why the war often is welcomed as an element of extreme simplification.

Every tool which seems to give us a similar simplification which concerns the choices multitude in the real world is seen with favor: firstly the pre-tax national product. Every technique that leads to the different values flattening in a single scale – as the

conversion of human lives or clean area in dollars – simulates this simplification. Women, shared between their own creative energies and the care for every single family member, have every day the occasion to mention that the roles stereotypes and the budget shifts are both inadequate tools to reach a long term well-being» (ibid. 146).

### **The capabilities approach**

Theories of justice did not take interest of the care matter. It is a serious limitation, because it prevents a right definition and application concerning public policies to grant human dignity. From this thesis originates, in Martha Nussbaum's thought, a path based not only on logical arguments, but also on the story concerning real and daily lives of couples, families, people experiencing in their biographies the care urgency, coming - through this path - to conclusions of great relevance both theoretical and practical.

As demonstrated by her effort in the elaboration of *Reports on human development* within the *United Nations Development Program*, these two dimensions - research and political submission - are tightly intertwined in the philosopher's activity.

Nussbaum's normative theory and her practical philosophy materialize in the so-called "ethics of capabilities". It should be understood the alternative nature of this proposal as regards the ethics of rights and its traditional liberal system. Right in its alternative nature it is possible to catch the premise of the transition from welfare to good life. The capabilities approach, as rephrased by the author on the basis of Amartya Sen's definition (1985), is - in our opinion - the best methodological answer to the search for the good life. In his works, Sen called several times into question the foundation of the welfare, or rather the identification of the well-being with the individual profit. On the one hand, this criterion maintains strongly traits of affinity with the meanings that pleasure and happiness acquired in Jeremy Bentham's and John Stuart Mill's doctrines; on the other, it adds the criterion according to which it is necessary to refer to the totality individual utilities to evaluate the efficacy in a specific situation (Sen 2006). The consequence is the imperative to achieve the higher possible sum of utilities. According to Sen, an inadequate conception of the individual appears, not considering its essential and constitutive moral dimension. If we adopt the concept of *person* rather than that of *individual* (on this point Nussbaum's contribution is decisive), the egoistic interest and the aspiration to well-being turn out to be inadequate to judge the condition of good or bad life. A person should be considered especially in his/her capabilities to carry out projects, fulfil commitments, affirm values. Similarly appears inadequate the theory about the choice rationality, which hold to be true rational only the behaviour that maximizes the egoistic interest, ignoring moral instances and emotional elements that contribute to lead the human action. Sen brings out from this and other criticisms a new concept of well-being, free of liberal utilitarianism

and based instead on the execution of so-called “functioning”. This expression refers to what a person is able to do or not to do during his/her life, that is the concrete fulfilments of his/her capabilities. Expressed in Aristotelian language, the functioning is the act (gr. *ἐνέργεια*; *ἐντελέχεια*; lat. *actus*) while the ability is the potency (gr. *δύναμις*; lat. *potentia*). It is possible to include in the idea of feeling good a variety of conditions and actions, far apart from the pursuit of a personal advantage. This put us in a horizon of a meaning which concerns the human realization, for which also become relevant choices and values in contrast to the egoistic interest.

The capabilities approach by Sen, therefore, represents an alternative perspective both compared to the liberal doctrines and the communitarian one. The well-being, if it can't be reduced to an utility calculation, on the other hand it can't be conceived without focusing on the importance of the differences among people. The well-being and the good life depend on the different needs and different capabilities of the human beings. From the satisfaction of needs and realization of capabilities derives the personal development. But there is not in Sen's speech an indication of basic skills, because proceeding in this way represents for him a risk of arbitrariness that he doesn't want to meet. Just to avoid this (and remaining faithful to a rigorous declaration concerning the principle of differences), Sen prefers to face with another risk. He want to remain in an area of weak assertions and proposals where people can try to translate them into guidelines regarding public ethics.

This instead is the operation started by Martha Nussbaum. She offers us a list of fundamental human capabilities (1. *Life*; 2. *Health*; 3. *Physical Integrity*; 4. *Senses, Imagination and Thought*; 5. *Feelings*; 6. *Practical Reason*; 7. *Membership*; 8. *Other Species*; 9. *Game*; 10. *Control of their Environment*), putting to the credibility the specific theory possibility to transport into a concrete ethical-political praxis. She suggests that this list «remains open; so we can always question it, re-making it» (2002: 74-75).

Moreover it is a «a universalist normative approach as a valid basis to face with women's problems in developing countries» (ibid. 57). The capabilities approach in fact, considering

*«the resources and opportunities dissemination as regards every single person, thinking about every single individual as a person with his/her own dignity, because of a right line», cleans the field from the patriarchal equivoque. Basing people's thought on this idea «women are considered as simple parts of an organic unity, as the family or the community, and their interests are subordinated to the wider aims concerning this unity. That means usually they are subordinated to male's interests» (ibid. 67).*

Realizing this operation, the philosopher shows us all the advantages of the *capabilities language* comparing it with the *rights language*.

Moreover – and it is not a small problem – we underline that «it is not rigidly chained to a particular historical or cultural tradition, as instead we consider the case for rights» (ibid. 89). Nevertheless, it is recognized that «the rights language maintains the sense of an agreement common area» and «the reference framework of the capabilities and that of the human rights are complementary (ibid. 92).

Nevertheless some precautions are indispensable because of their ambiguity in the rights language, historically a given ambiguity which has been accentuated by the economic globalization. The reference to rights, in fact, in a part of the world has often been associated to the entrance of foreign capitals. Now we have to consider that sometimes «the markets are promoters of human capabilities, but sometimes they do that in an unequal way. And we have some capabilities, for example those connected to our health and our education, that markets are not able to grant adequately to people» (ibid. 90). For this reason, it should be unwise an exclusive use of the rights language without using also the capabilities one. We have to add, that the last considered, also being more adequate to give norms for human dignity realization, on the other hand, puts a not easy solution problem: how can we measure concretely people capabilities? «If this difficulty already rises in the moment in which we are thinking about problems so banal as our health and mobility, it comes out in a more embarrassing way if we consider my list - Nussbaum says. It adds several voices apparently elusive, as the imaginary development and the emotive health conditions» (ibid. 95).

This shows that the capabilities approach, from one side, has still need to be refined, from the hand it can count on «the inventive concerning those who suffer from their privations: they will help us finding the way to describe, and also to quantify, the difficult conditions in which they are constricted to live» (ibid. 96).

## Bibliography

1. Agarwal, B., Humphries, J. and Robeyns, I (edits.) (2005), *Amartya Sen's Work and Ideas: A Gender Perspective*, Oxford, Routledge.
2. Balbo, L. (2008), *Il lavoro e la cura*, Torino, Einaudi.
3. Balbo, L. (edit.) (2013), *Imparare, sbagliare, vivere. Storie di Lifelong Learning*, Milano, Franco Angeli.
4. Bateson, M. C. (1992), *Comporre una vita*, Milano, Feltrinelli.
5. Bauman Z. (2002), *Modernità liquida*, Roma-Bari, Laterza.
6. Bauman Z. (2003), *Liquid Love. On the Frailty of Human Bonds*, Oxford, Publishing Ltd.
7. Bauman Z. (2003), *Una nuova condizione umana*, Milano, Vita E Pensiero.
8. Bauman Z. (2005), *Fiducia e paura nella città*, Milano, Bruno Mondadori.

9. Beck U. (2000), *La società del rischio. Verso una seconda modernità*, Roma, Carocci.
10. Beck U. (2001), *La società globale del rischio*, Trieste, Asterios.
11. Beck U. (2003), *Un mondo a rischio*, Torino, Einaudi.
12. Beck U. (2008), *Costruire la propria vita. Quanto costa la realizzazione di sé nella società del rischio*, Bologna, il Mulino.
13. Magni S. F. (2006), *L'etica delle capacità. La filosofia pratica di Sen e Nussbaum*, Bologna, il Mulino.
14. Nussbaum, M. C. (2000), *Women and Human Development: the Capabilities Approach*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
15. Nussbaum, M. C. (2002), *Giustizia sociale e dignità umana. Da individui a persone*, Bologna, il Mulino.
16. Nussbaum, M. C. (2012), *Creare capacità. Liberarsi dalla dittatura del Pil*, Bologna, il Mulino.
17. Selvaggio M. A. (edit.) (2013), *Educatrici di società. Racconti di donne e di cura*, Napoli, ESA.
18. Sen, A. K. (1985), *Commodities and Capabilities*, Oxford, Elsevier Science Publishers.
19. Sen, A. K. (1993), *Capability and Well-Being* in M. C. Nussbaum and A. K. Sen (eds), *The Quality of Life*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, pp. 30-53.
20. Sen, A. K. (2004), *Capabilities, Lists and Public Reason: Continuing the Conversation*, "Feminist Economics", 10 (3), pp. 77-80.
21. Sen, A. K. (2006), *Etica ed economia*, Roma-Bari, Laterza.