

The Capability Approach and Sociological Conceptions of Human Agency: An Empirical Assessment on the Basis of an Analysis of Activation Policies¹

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1 Practical implications of conceptions of agency in welfare settings

Many researches have focused on the implications of the development of “active welfare states”, and its impact on the conditionalization of social rights in which citizenship is transformed from a “status into contract” (Handler, 2004). It is generally acknowledged that this amounts to a new balance between rights and responsibilities, particularly in the case of young persons. Processes described as the “individualization” of social policies (van Berkel and Borghi, 2007) point to the increasing focus on individual responsibility for shaping one’s own integration trajectory. The switch towards individualized policies paired with new public management governance modes (Pollit and Bouckaert, 1998) within local welfare systems (Finn, 2000) increases the role of the frontline implementation level of policies. Studies on the micro- and meso-level of implementation have shown that the rationalities of the active welfare state point to a new form of “governing” the unemployed (Mitchell, 1995; Rose, 1998; Mc Donald and Marston, 2005). Human service organizations are seen as participating in the “production” of subjects, which have the right disposition and attitudes for the labour market (Darmon and Perez, 2011). These changes correspond to changing conceptions of a Welfare subject, more particularly, “in policy-makers’ (and one should add welfare state researchers – the Author) beliefs about *motivation* (...) and *agency* — the capacity of individuals, especially the beneficiaries of welfare, to engage in independent or autonomous actions” (LeGrand, 2003: X).

These socio-theoretical and political conceptions of human agency – constituting at the same time competing conceptions on the relation between socio-structural constraints and the capacity of individuals for agentic action – have important practical implications when it comes to debates about individual responsibility in Social Policy. Approaches to welfare reforms aiming to establish an “enabling state” (Gilbert, 2005) or reforming social protection from “safety nets to trampolines” (Torfing, 1997) are undergirded by a grammar of individual responsibility and autonomy which may have a tendency to over-estimate the agency of welfare beneficiaries or may fail to acknowledge it’s necessary preconditions. It seems as if, sometimes, social integration policies presume the autonomous individual that they are trying to promote. This situation may correspond to “autonomy gaps” that Anderson describes as “discrepancy between the capacities for choice that are presupposed by public policies, (...) and the capacities that people actually have or will develop” (2009: page). In the case of transition programmes, beneficiaries are addressed as active autonomous agents, which in turn are also held responsible for the outcome of their pathways. How do young persons react

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and deal with this “injunction to autonomy” (Duvoux, 2008)? How do they react to the diverse institutional categorizations?

Answering these questions requires, on the one side, to scrutinize the adequacy of different conceptions of human agency in contemporary social policy research. On the other side, it calls for an empirical investigation in order to know if active policies are characterized by an “autonomy gap” or if beneficiaries embrace the “injunction to autonomy” in a positive way. It is then important to adopt an action-theoretic framework for analyzing welfare beneficiaries' agency and confront the hypothetical model of agency influential in social policy design, with accounts of agency and vulnerability grounded in the lived experiences of social actors.

2 Competing constructions of the welfare subject in social policy and social policy research: Objects of control, rational fools or “evaluative beings”?

This following section reviews different socio-theoretical conceptions of agency that are influential in policy-design and critical social policy research and confronts them to central claims of the C.A. It is argued that despite the fact that the C.A. provides a serious blow to individual rational actor tradition, it needs to be supplemented by additional elements in order to grasp the subjectivation processes at work in active policies. In doing so, the C.A. could gain a better appraisal of the micro workings of power.

Confronting the capability approach to sociological conceptions of human agency

An ubiquitous conception of agency in welfare debates conceives beneficiaries of the welfare state as rationally choosing agents (Taylor-Gooby, 2008). Here, welfare state beneficiaries are modeled as acting on the basis of individual utility optimization and preference fulfillment, or as Margareth Archer puts it, as “profit maximizing bargain hunters” (2000). The introduction of sanctions and work incentives are intimately linked to the idea that welfare beneficiaries conceive work as a disutility and would rationally choose free-time over work, and that in turn, the welfare state would have to use “carrots” (work incentives) and “sticks” (economic incentives) in order to make welfare beneficiaries choose work over welfare.² Such a perspective is not only ethically problematic - due its focus on voluntarism (unemployment is partly seen as a “choice”) - but also empirically questionable, as it conceives welfare beneficiaries as “rational fools” (Sen 1977). Sen’s early critique of the conception of the actor in neo-classical economics highlights the fact that utilities are by far not “the only things of intrinsic value” (Sen, 2002: 33). According to Sen, “the actual behavior of human beings is affected by ethical considerations” (Sen, 2002: 52), insofar they are acting on the basis of what they “have reason to value” (ibid.). In Sen’s view, “rationality of choice (...) is primarily a matter of basing our choices - explicitly or by implication - on reasoning that we can reflectively sustain if we subject them to critical reasoning (...) People are, by and large, able to reason and scrutinize their own decisions and those of others” (Sen, 2009: 180-178). Sen’s “reflexive actor” is able to deliberate, to assess and to think about the “good reasons” he has to choose and to conduct as certain action. Sen’s critique of the utilitarian philosophical foundations of neoclassical economic theory denounces the assumption that individuals are (only) instrumentally rational and gives a serious blow to the idea that individuals evaluate

² The use of (monetary) sanctions are implicitly based on the presupposition that “welfare recipients can comply with work requirements and that they can calculate the costs and benefits of compliance” (Hasenfeld et. al 2004: 304), two assumptions that may not apply to all beneficiaries of active labour market policies.

their participation in social relationships based upon the costs and benefits they impose on them. Rational choice's neglect the possibility that actors could act on and in function of their "multiple commitments" (Sen, 1999). This apparent neglect of emotions, identities or vulnerabilities linked to gender, race, or class (i.e. the way in which "utilities" are socially and historically structured) becomes apparent in the case of work.

As Friedland and Alford put it: "Work provides identities as much as it provides bread for the table; participation in markets is as much an expression of who one is as what one wants. Economists typically assume that work is a disutility to be traded of against leisure or income. Work contains all kinds of positive utilities - whether the expression of an identity (I work as or i am a metal worker) a relative performance (i am a good metal worker) gender (it is good for a man to be a metal worker) or social status (it is better to be a metal worker than a salesperson). These utilities are socially and historically structured" (1991: 234).

Such a perspective is of outmost importance for active labour market policies as it shows that individual reasons for action are structured by a multitude of institutionally embedded utilities. The first expansion that the C.A. provides to rational choice theory is to introduce a model able to account for what persons "have reason" to value, and especially, "ethical" reasoning in the reconstruction of individual action. In fact, citizens of the welfare state do not simply decide to enter work or quit benefits because of economic incentives, which puts into question the legitimacy of a "carrot and sticks" approach (Handler, 2004). As Dubet and Veretout (2001) have shown, "actors do not play on the basis of their interests, their whole life is at stake, the image they have of themselves, their identities, and they emerge from the conflicts between their self-image and the image that is attributed to them" (2001, 429, own translation).

Sen's attempt to introduce ethics into economic theory³ clearly points towards a critique of the "narrowness of motivation in economics" (Sen, 1990, 282) and the subsumption of human rationality to the principle of "utility maximization". But he also equips individuals with reflexivity: in difference to rational choice and utilitarian approaches, which suppose a stable set of preferences that determines the behavior of persons, Sen's anti-utilitarian formulation "have reason to value" defines human beings as vested with the moral capacity to develop a conception of the good, e.g. with the ability for practical reasoning. This also yields a new perspective on preferences and aspirations: actors deliberate their preferences with themselves or with others (Eymard-Duvernay, 2008: 199-200). Indeed, in this perspective, individuals cannot be conceived as subjectively acted upon by their tastes, but as self-scrutinizing agents, able to act upon their (broadly socially defined) utilities. As such, Sen's conception of agency does not only distance itself from a conception of human agents as rational utility maximizers driven by their (exogenous, ordered and stable) preferences (the "rational fools" argument), but it also challenges approaches that highlight the importance of habitualized dispositions and structural constraints of agency, as we find them in Bourdieu's concept of habitus⁴ (the

³ Sen describes abundantly the non-instrumental value of work, e.g.: "paid work matters for quality of life partly because it provides identity to people and opportunities to socialise with others" (Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi, 2009: 49; Sen, 1997). Many other authors refer to Sen for describing work not only as a mean for material subsistence, but as a vehicle for participation "in a system of cooperative production" (Anderson, 1999: 318). In this perspective, "the nature of the work that we are allowed or required to do has considerable ethical significance" (Sayer, 2005: 118).

⁴ Here, Bourdieu's conception of human agency, defining human action as resulting predominantly from a unconscious, habitualised incorporation of the "rules of the game" significantly differs from Sen's stress on

“symbolic fools” argument - Bohmann, 1997). Sen’s approach highlights the idea that individuals are reasoning and self-scrutinizing and that they “do not just act by reacting to the world, but reason about how they ought to act, and moreover do so in a way that entails reflection upon themselves” (Davis, 2011: 5). In this sense, the capability perspective is an open invitation for sociologists to engage in the question of reflexivity (Archer, 2010) or the role of value in everyday-life (Sayer, 2005).

Possible shortcomings of the capability approach: an ambiguous concept of freedom and a lacking theory of the social constitution of selves

In a nutshell, Sen’s conception of agency and the subject presupposes a good deal of reflexivity. It seems as if the capacity to act on behalf of one’s own value commitments, to “be an agent who brings about change” (Sen, 2000) respectively who “chooses” reflexively between different options of his opportunity set on behalf of what he “has reason to value” is quite straightforwardly assumed. While Sen urges us to be conscious of the “deep and pervasive influence of society on our thinking and doing” (Sen, 2010), his conception of agency remains no “more than a normative horizon for sociologists” (Zimmerman, 2005: 464). According to Zimmerman, the C.A., in conceptualizing freedom predominantly as a value, “remains sociologically unspecified and suffers from weakness and inconsistency”, as “it is not able to consider the required “skills and supports that are required to make (such) decisions” (Zimmerman, 2005: 474). A similar claim is brought forwards by Dean, according to whom individuals in a capability perspective are “objectively distanced from the relations of power within which her identity and her life chances must be constituted” (2009: 2). I argue that there is much to gain from a deeper empirical and theoretical investigation of sociological approaches to human agency for uncovering weaknesses of the C.A. As it is not possible to provide an overview of different conceptualizations of human agency, I will solely focus on the dimension of power elicited by Dean (2009) and the critique by Deneulin and McGregor described below.

Firstly, it can be seen as a minimal consensus for sociologists that the construction of a fully autonomous subject – as for instance depicted in certain liberal-individualist conceptions – is an illusion, and it often dismisses the necessary preconditions that undergird such an autonomy.⁵ If one wants to blend the capability approach with sociological approaches to human agency and subjectivity, it is thus of crucial importance to define the necessary preconditions that undergird such a conception. Secondly, it becomes increasingly clear that inequalities are not restricted to equipment with material goods, but that they shape the self-

human reflexivity, a fact often too easily dismissed in attempts to “synthesize” Bourdieusian social theory with Sen (see e.g. Hart, 2012). Nevertheless, Bourdieu’s own position can be seen as stressing too much the habitual side of human action, and as such he is “throwing the baby out with bathwater” (Jenkins, 1992: 43). As Jenkins brilliantly puts it: “one is also perhaps entitled to ask Bourdieu an awkward question, (...) if sociologists such as Bourdieu can set themselves goals and objectives, which they then pursue, why can this not also be true for their research subjects?” (Jenkins, 1992: 44). Bohmann also underlines that “Bourdieu’s strategic, market oriented actors will be no less “symbolic fools”, unless they begin to reflect upon and thus transform the dispositions that they have been socialised into, at least one at a time. Such reflexive and interpretative agency loosens the ties between action and habitus, and makes possible a self-interpreting form of identity for at least some aspects of everyday life” (Bohmann, 1997: 176).

⁵ For instance, the capacity for reflexive action is far from an universal attribute. As for instance, Bourdieu describes, “below a certain level of economic security, (...) allowing some grip on the present, agents can neither conceive nor perform most of the behaviors which presuppose an effort to take a grip on the future” (Bourdieu, 2001: 17).

interpretations, identities, preferences and aspirations themselves. Social structure not only defines what you get, but also what you want. This refers to the ways in which social structure and culture enter into preference formation. Especially theoretical perspectives inspired by Michel Foucault provide a heavy blow to “optimistic” approaches to human agency, of which Sen’s concept of the actor can reliably be attributed to (Hacking, 2004: 284). Foucault-inspired approaches have shown that power is not so much a matter of imposing direct constraints upon citizens as of a production of subjectivities through discourses, which are relevant for human agency insofar as they define the frames for acceptable self-descriptions and the range of alternative actions. The space of the possible is thus “not just defined by physical and social barriers and opportunities, but also by the ways in which we conceptualize and realize who we are and what we may be” (Hacking, 2004: 287). The article argues that Sen’s realization-based approach needs to be supplemented by concepts which allow accounting for the social mediatedness of individual identities and for the social construction of subjectivity within different social contexts.

While the C.A. does take into account a range of constraints for human agency – more specifically – political and economic guarantees, entitlements and opportunities (Sen, 2000), it marginally takes into account those kinds of constraints that are linked to the evaluative-symbolic field of language, and the unavoidable embeddedness of the human subject in webs of meaning. These reflections on the social constitution of the self point to an empty space in contemporary debates on the C.A., that is – a sound conceptualization of the cultural embeddedness of identities. As Severine Deneulin and Allister Mc Gregor argued in a recent article on the socio-theoretical foundations of the C.A., the potential of the capabilities approach “is diminished by its insufficient treatment of the social construction of meaning. Social meanings enable people to make value judgments about what they will do and be, and also to evaluate how satisfied they are about what they are able to achieve. From this viewpoint, a person’s state of wellbeing must be understood as being socially and psychologically co-constituted in specific social and cultural contexts” (2010: 501). The acknowledgement of the relevance of cultural contexts for the construction of our identities enlarges significantly the analytical scope of the C.A. “to much more broad-reaching factors such as symbolic-semantic resources and the way those cultural patterns frame the range of available options” (Anderson and Honneth, 2005: 143).

Such a perspective becomes particularly important when analyzing the practices of subject formation within concrete welfare settings. Albeit mostly overseen by capability inspired research⁶, classical research on the construction of identity within welfare settings has shown that “the poor as a social type emerge only when society recognizes poverty as a special status and assigns specific persons requiring assistance to that category” (Simmel, 1965). Simmel points our attention to an important dimension of the exercise of power, which is not taken into account by an “existential optimist” position like the one proposed by Amartya Sen. As Leisering puts it: “the welfare state also implies new power relationships. People become clients of bureaucrats, social professionals, and experts such as doctors, psychologists, lawyers, and sociologists. Experts do not only provide services but redefine the identities and

⁶ This doesn’t mean that the C.A. would per se not allow to take into account such issues, but that these issues are usually not taken into account in empirical applications of the C.A. Sen himself points to the importance of being aware for the “deep and pervasive influence of society on our thinking and doing” (Sen, 2010), or for instance to account for the capability to appear in public without shame (Sen, 1983: 161). Others have argued that the C.A. is able to both account for redistribution and recognition (Robeyns, 2003). Nevertheless, the question of “how much reflexivity” remains valid.

knowledge categories by which people perceive themselves and their situation” (2004: 214). The classifications used within welfare state settings are therefore never value free, but mostly have an openly moral flavor. As Hasenfeld precises, “typifications of clients via diagnoses, treatments, and inferences of causality are socially constructed categories reflecting the jurisdictional claims of the particular helping profession. Yet these categories are inherently moral because, as technically neutral they may seem, they publicly confer a moral status to clients, they provide moral justifications for the actions caregivers take, and clients internalize them as a reflection of their own self Identity and valuation” (Hasenfeld, 2010). Human service organizations can be analyzed in terms of their “people processing” and “people changing” operations (Hasenfeld, 2010). Their working material are individual human beings, who are defined of having certain problems, needs and deficits, and their means to achieve this “people changing” is communication and interaction. As such, institutional settings play a central role as “discursive environments for self construction” (Gubrium and Holstein, 1995), in which identities of beneficiaries are shaped according to the normative patterns of social institutions. Human service organizations explicitly aim at changing identities, motivation and specific attributes of persons. The definition of problems and the classifications used in people processing organizations does not happen in a free-floating space, but reflect larger moral systems. The ways in which people are “changed” are thereby not contingent, but reflect classifications and goal orientations from the institutional environment. They are “embedded in a broader institutional environment from which they derive their legitimacy, their license to work on people and their service technologies” (Garrow and Hasenfeld, 2010: 33).

3 Welfare settings as discursive spaces: how human service organizations produce subjectivities

The following analysis is based on a research conducted in a Swiss active labour market measure (the SeMo) financed by the unemployment insurance and implemented by third-sector organizations. They provide a work-based “learning” program preparing young persons to the apprenticeship-market. The measure consists of an important share of job search assistance, a minor part of schooling, workshops simulating a working environment, the conduct of internships at different firms and an intensive, weekly individualized counseling. The official aims of the SeMo is to augment the propensity of young persons to enter a work through doing an “in-depth” assessment of their personal, family, and school situation, to develop a contractualized, individualized integration agreement, and last but not least, to verify the viability of their project in relation to the labour-market situation. The research is based on narrative interviews conducted with 15-22 year old youngsters who are participating in an active labour market scheme after their compulsory schooling. From an interactionist perspective, the focus of analysis is (narrated) practices, self-interpretations, self-positionings and evaluations. In addition, structured interviews were conducted with frontline and management-level professionals and with administrative staff from the funding institution. On the basis of these empirical data, I try to reconstruct how specific relations towards themselves emerge from institutional classifications during their transition phase. Methodologically, these narratives are analyzed as expression of more or less reflexive self-evaluations, and mediated by the symbolic and semantic field of language, which are central to understand the agency of young persons and the categories of deservingness and moral worth they are involved in.

4 Making up “marketizeable” biographies – constructing the autonomous, employable citizen

Governing through freedom: the personal integration contract as a subjectivation device

During the first month in the Labour-market scheme, an “individualized action plan” is concluded between the young person and his personal adviser. This action plan contains individual objectives, as well as the means deemed relevant to reach these goals. The moment of the negotiation and discussion of this personalized integration agreement constitutes a central arena of institutional “micro politics”. The individualized integration agreement can be seen as a form of “dialogue based-activation” (Born and Jenson, 2010), which is constituted within a sometimes contradictory mix between compulsory activation and a ‘client-centered approach’. The contract constructs the person as a morally self-responsible person. Institutions are here governing through a specific rationality, which is based on the very core notion of autonomy. Autonomy enshrines the idea of a person giving “laws” to him self (auto = self, nomos = rules), which are based on one’s own volition. On a more abstract level, the organizational technology of the individualized action plan is a prime example of the “liberal paradox”, “with people being socially subjectivated by individually subjecting themselves to a governing programmatic of self rationalization”, (Lessenisch, 2011: 310). Professionals, when negotiating the individualized integration agreement with the young persons are operating within a paradoxical situation: on the one side, they have to respect the “individuality” of the person and acknowledge that they have – at least a minimal level of – life-practical autonomy and try not to crush the often fragile motivation of a person. On the other side, they have to prescribe – to a certain extent – on what goals a young person has to work on.

“So, me, I ask them to bring some ideas, and very often it is “I don’t know”, then we try to talk to them, and when I see that it doesn’t work, I ask them to think about it for the next time, and then we take some time and I am going to propose them some things to, because, sometimes there are things I see very clearly and I want them to work on these things so I try. If they are “taking it” – much the better – if not, then sometimes it is complicated, because some of the goals are so important that we cannot ignore them.”
(personal integration counsellor, SeMo 1)

Here professional action oscillates constantly between “should do” and “can do“, “subtly mixing the refusal to act paternalistic, and moralize behavior of clients, without imposing what he thinks is the best, while at the same time maintaining the injunction to take oneself in one’s own hands and get implied and to engage” (Cantelli and Genard, 2007: 25, own translation). We see that the contractualized matrix of the integration agreement is a “powerful pedagogical motor” (Pattaroni, 2007). On the one side, it instaurates the young person as a responsible self-observer, which is able to work on oneself insofar as he “knows” what own characteristics are impeding him from entering the labour market. On the other side, this contractual agreement activates a number of techniques that individualize the person and oblige him to account for his actions and to stand up for what he is ought to do as a morally responsible person. The contract is not only use to commit the beneficiaries to a specific, organizationally desirable behavior, but “first and foremost to commit them to a particular inner dialogue about obligation and freedom (...) they become contracts both between the administration and the citizens and between the citizens and their own selves” (Akerstron and Anderson, 2007: 120).

Social work is an arena for the construction of subjectivities. It has thus not to be analyzed as an “external” processing through institutions but by requires putting to light through what ways and technologies certain forms of subjectivity (e.g. certain forms of behaving, matched to the purposes of society) are produced. It is argued that the “addressation practices” of the institution is pointing to fostering a certain relation to oneself, or more particularly to instaurate a biographical concern for one’s own future. As one counselor puts it, “*we re-place the young person in the middle of his project, and then ask, in a non-menacing way, look, what will your life-course look like?*” This instauration of a planificatory posture is interpreted as “*bringing everybody to where they ask this question to themselves*“. The encouragement to produce a self-narrative of possible future selves is not happening in a free floating space, and albeit the professionals highlight the fact that “*we start from dreams, from self-representations, of what they wish for themselves, and from how a job should look like in order to make them happy*”. The narrative self imagination fostered here is very much oriented towards the production of “viable” future selves which are “realist and realizable” and which “keep the road” (or can withstand) the evaluations of the labour-market. The preference for a profession is structured and accompanied as an individualized choice. As summarized in the following quote:

“What do you have? What are your resources? What are you? You may be unbearable, but you are so creative! You are. And what does that mean? What profile will you be? Artistic profile? Or rather entrepreneur? You prefer working with others or alone? Inside? Outside? This allows us to bring everybody to the point where they are asking themselves these kinds of questions” (Manager of SeMo 1).

These words place the subject as an individual “manager” of one’s life-course and biography, and the strong focus on the individuality and the own preferences of the young person aims at making emerge “individuality herself, independently capable of action and driven by her internal motivations” (Ehrenberg, 1999: 311). The importance that is put on the fact that “*young people have to ask themselves these questions*” reveals the reluctance to directly impact, control or prescribe on the biographical plans of the young persons. Much more, it fosters a specific relation to oneself, in which the young persons rationally calculate and evaluate, on the basis of self-observation (“what do I want?”) their labour-market options (“what can I rationally expect?”) and urges them to conceive their Labour-market integration trajectory as an individual biographical self-project. The youngster is induced “to analyze his past life, define certain characteristics of his personality, unfolds his motivations and his interests in order to make emerge a professional project and to examine it’s viability according to the actual conjunctures on the labour market” (Delory-Momberger, 2001: 123, own translation). The rationality in which the detailed description of ones own motivations and reasons for the selection of a certain apprenticeship can be described as a “technology of agency” (McDonald and Marston, 2005; Dean, 2009). These technologies are clearly designed to shape the way people present themselves and operate in the world – insofar they are asked to subjugate themselves to a certain descriptive vocabulary, anticipate demands of employers in a fictional situation in which a job-interview is simulated. Here it is important to highlight the “double” effect of subjectivisation: it is through the simultaneous, self-induced “subjugation” to the discourses which provides agency, that young persons learn to articulate themselves to a symbolic order. These technologies are not only relevant as they fashion a form of self-presentation, but also as they transform the self-interpretations, biographical plans and narratives themselves. As Fraser puts it, “(their) personal social identity can only be expressed and understood through the categories available to them in discourse” (Fraser, 1990: 282). The network of discourses and legitimized self-interpretations and practices produces

subjectivities insofar as it sets the framework for institutionally acceptable, recognized and finally “intelligible” narratives.

5 Exit, voice loyalty: between symbolic rehabilitation and ambivalent resistance

Based on Hirschman’s typology of “exit, voice and loyalty” (1970), one can typologize the reaction of young persons to the identity frameworks of the institution. For some, the option of “loyalty” to the normative discursive resources of the institution allow a kind of symbolic rehabilitation. On the one side, they are less bound to overcome their marginal position on the labour market, than to maintain a stable identity when confronted to the stigma of inactivity. The use of the institutional “vocabulary of motives” (Mills) about subjective self-mobilization, the interiorization of institutional demands (“I have to motivate myself”) and the submission to the identity frameworks of the institution (Kaufmann, 2004) guarantee a minimum of self-esteem and respectability. On the other side, it increases dependency to the institution in maintaining a satisfying self-construction: “loyalty” often goes hand in hand with a moral boundary drawing towards other beneficiaries, and of loyalty to “norms that support their own degradation” (Appadurai, 2004). As one beneficiary describes, “*Me, I don’t see me in their situation, I worked a lot in school in order to go further, while them, they didn’t care about their grades, they wanted to have a job like they have now*”. The compliance with the norm of meritocracy, according to which everyone gets what he deserves on the basis of his own merits, allows to describe oneself as a “meriting beneficiary”, and maintain a sense of self-worth and respectability.

The strategy of “exit” describes a form of resistance to the identity frameworks of the institution. This goes hand in hand with the rejection of a self-conception based on work, and entails processes of non-conformity and of subjective disengagement. This can lead to processes of self-identification with the label of “bad student” or “scrounger”, “*because the SeMo, it is for scroungers, you rarely find persons who just fell and have some problems to find but who want to work. You mostly find persons like me, who don’t really want to work*”. This self-attribution of failure and personalization of structural inequalities also follows the logic of meritocracy: if access to social positions is allegedly guided by individual effort and initiative only, only the individual can be blamed for his failure. The individualist bias enshrined in the idea of the autonomous, contractual view of the subject attributing responsibility for one’s own fate leads to the fact that “failure can only be linked to the incapacities of the individual who judges itself not good enough or not competitive enough”(Dubet, 2006: 417, own translation). The tragedy of this conception is that subjects reclaim their status as autonomous beings, even accepting the shame of not complying with the imperative of autonomy, rather than renouncing to it and feeling as a victim.

The gap between the conception of welfare beneficiaries as utility maximizing bargain hunters and the empirical, individual reasons for action becomes apparent in the case of Daniel, whose career choices seem to operate between “not aiming too high” (in order to keep the plan realizable) and not aiming “too low”, in order that it is still possible to identify with his job choice. His reluctance to do any job possible does not derive from the weak monetary returns attached to it, but from the willingness to avoid becoming a kind of person that is neither valued by himself, nor recognized by society: “*Yes... I know many folks who did nothing and who turned the wrong way afterwards (...) I was really scared to become one of those street guys, just hanging around*”. Job search activities, and the fragile, but loyal relation he maintains with the world of work is driven by his attempts to restore a sense of self-value and dignity in the face of jobs that are unpromising in terms of social recognition. The alleged “unwillingness“ to enter the workforce derives partly from the status attached to

specific jobs rather than a utilitarian calculus: *“because I never wanted to work before, I never saw me working in these jobs. ... These are jobs for VSO⁷”*. The institutional classification within the lower school grades acts here as a stigma, which enters into the self-descriptions, self-interpretations and action-strategies of actors. But it doesn't only come with an implicit judgment on the social value of individuals, but also opens, restricts and structures their agency. While John interiorizes the implicit scale of value of different jobs, he also sees himself as not “good enough” for most of the pathways. On the other side, John displays a low commitment to future occupational selves with low social status (neither valued by oneself nor by others). John's categorization as a “VSO” thus leads him to a self-elimination from more prestigious apprenticeship places. As Jenkins describes: “careers” are “as much the products of categorizations as of self-identification and self-determination” (Jenkins, 2000: 12). This is reflected in different quotes in which John draws back on the institutionally provided knowledge, which both restricts and enables his expectations. The discursive construction of his identity in institutional frameworks amounts to finding a recognized self-definition which is “satisfying” for himself, and at the same time validated by the institutions who anchor and frame it through categorization.

Institutional labeling processes and the experience of stigma play a central role in the self-conceptions, and accordingly, the modes of reflexivity of the young persons. This ultimately calls to take into account the relationship between wider social relationships and the construction of subjectivity. This can be seen particularly in the case of young person interiorizing an outsider identity in order to avoid alienation. It results in a form of “symbolic vulnerability” (Chatel, 2008). Confronted with repeated failure and rejection, the disengagement from those “games” which threaten the own feeling of dignity, makes more and more difficult to maintain a positive self-image, and “not playing the game anymore” (Dubet, 2004: 628) seems to be a viable option. The “capacity to act”, or a sense of “biographical agency” is only possible from the background of “a view of oneself as the legitimate source of reasons for acting” (Anderson and Honneth 2005: 146). But how can one “project” oneself when “me” is considered futile and without qualities?

6 Accounting for culture and power – venues for the capability approach

This points to an important dimension within the C.A.: Nussbaum's basic capability of “having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation” (Nussbaum, 2001). The bases of self-respect “are emergent properties of a dynamic process in which individuals come to experience themselves as having a certain status,(...) as the result of an ongoing inter-subjective process, in which one's attitude toward oneself emerges in one's encounter with an other's attitude toward oneself”(Anderson and Honneth, 2005). The loss of positive relations towards oneself is a threat to personal autonomy as this “requires the resources and circumstances necessary for actually being able to lead the life one determines to be worthwhile” (Anderson and Honneth, 2005). This strongly refers to the normatively loaded field of “evaluations” of young persons, reflected in the morally loaded categories of being “unemployed”, of the stigma that is sometimes attached to the status of “inactivity”, and the moral blame attached to it, but also to the social value and recognition that is connected with certain occupations, professions and educational pathways.

⁷ Most cantons in Switzerland have three tier obligatory school system. In the canton of Vaud VSO (voie secondaire a options) constitutes the lower tier, with in some cases constituting a negative “signal” for employers.

7 Conclusion and outlook

Biographical plans and projects are thus an interactive achievement, between institutional actors, institutional and semi-official classifications and the classified themselves. This is a crucial dimension neglected so far in the C.A.: when people reflect on themselves, or narrate themselves in interviews, they necessarily draw back on a preexisting symbolic-semantic field of language. This field is unavoidably structured by powerful discourses, which restrict the field of the sayable, of the thinkable and do-able. The question at stake is then “how (...) is the space of possible and actual action determined not just by physical and social barriers and opportunities, but also by the ways in which we conceptualize and realize who we are and what we may be, in this here and now?” (Hacking, 2004: 287). Institutional discourses and practices produce subjectivity as they define the frames for acceptable self-descriptions and the range of action alternatives. This dimension has crucial implications on how to conceptualize power within the C.A.. Sen’s idea of “people choosing their identity” or “rationality before identity” (Sen, 2000) – which leads Hacking to present him as an “existential optimist” (Hacking, 2004) – may fail to appropriately account for the social embeddedness of individual identity and subjectivity, and are at risk of not taking into account what Lukes has called the “third dimension” (Lukes, 2005) of power. Lukes uses it to distinguish those relations of domination which are based on observable conflict and objective interests within political decision-making processes, from the relations in which the powerful transform the powerless in such a way that the latter behave as the former wish, without direct coercion or forcible constraint. While the first two dimensions of power can be accounted for by the C.A., the latter dimension requires some further conceptualizing. Here the role of labeling and categorization processes – as described in the empirical part of the paper – play an important role. These are mechanisms of the third dimension of power and “consist in what we might call excessive or unwanted recognition, where individuals are, in various ways and for differing reasons, reluctant to identify with some group or category ascribed to them” (Lukes, 2005: 119). Grundmann and Dravenau claim that equipping people with a certain array of goods and resources alone will not suffice to enhance their capabilities and life chances. It requires to concentrate “additionally on the actual processing of their agentic orientations, on the multifarious ways people – especially those with a different sociocultural background – reflect upon, make sense of, and utilize the human and nonhuman resources and sociocultural schemas available to them (Grundmann and Dravenau, 2010 : 94). In doing so, and as my empirical findings have shown, the capability approach can clearly gain a deeper and better understanding of the more subtle power relations that make-up human capabilities.

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