

Saving a Good Life in Modern Democracies

Yuko Kamishima

Research Fellow

Department of International Social Sciences

University of Tokyo

kamishima@zoo.email.ne.jp

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Abstract

In many parts of the world, people are living in a consumer culture. This paper considers the adverse effect this culture can have on the quality of life and on the operational capacity of the capability approach. For this purpose, I will look at the approaches proposed by Sen and Nussbaum that lead them to take a critical view of the Singapore government. The reasons for their criticisms that Singapore should secure political freedom are valid. However, such criticisms leave open the following questions: If the basic capabilities including political freedom are fulfilled, is it right for the affluent democracies to embrace a consumption culture? Are such politics and human life good? Singapore is a mirror of capitalism, reflecting the nature and future of this economic arrangement. Even if people's basic capabilities are fulfilled, it is unlikely that their desire for high consumption will change. In answering the questions, I have tried to make two points clear. First, Sen and Nussbaum's approaches may not be fully dealing with these issues. Second, if we aim for cosmopolitan equality of basic capabilities at a reasonable level, it is necessary for the capability approach to be concerned with quality of life in affluent democracies. How far we take these considerations into the capability approach may set a limit on its application.

I. Introduction

Particularly in the economically developed world, the general conception of a good life is expressed in material terms. A big house, a fancy car, a high-paying job, a multitude of bank accounts, brand-name outfits, gourmet food and so on, just to name a few. We judge people based on information related to their wealth and amount of material consumption. And importantly, the material goods they possess have more value if they are 'cosmopolitan', i.e., transnational brand-name items that one can find in glossy magazines. We live in times where even a cosmopolitan designer necktie can increase a politician's popularity. A good life in this conception indeed depends on how many world-famous goods one can consume. People believe that their lives are miserable without

them, despite the fact that objectively speaking they can actually have decent lives without them.

People in Singapore are no exception. It is reported that Singaporeans live in pursuit of the five Cs: cash, cars, condominiums, credit cards and club membership. The government of Singapore, whose legitimacy rests on the continuous supply of consumption goods, embraces the policy of consumerism. In his National Day Rally speech in 1996, Prime Minister Go Chok Tong announced. "Life for Singaporeans is not complete without shopping!"¹ Singapore's economy is deeply connected to global capitalism and its growth depends on the amount of consumption, whether by nationals or visitors, of cosmopolitan goods. A good life in the thinking of most Singaporeans and government officials seems to be a life where an individual consumes a large quantity of world-famous commodities. One has to be a good consumer to be a good citizen.

Is such a life good? Today, the capability approaches developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum are used to assess the quality of life. Although there are differences between Sen and Nussbaum, they both agree that political freedom is one of the core capabilities. Therefore, in the light of the capability approach, quality of life is low in Singapore where political freedom is considerably restricted. Surely Singaporeans need more political freedom, since it will serve their interests. However, is the provision of more political freedom enough to elevate their quality of life? Because, as in other wealthy countries, almost full enjoyment of political freedom may not necessarily put an end to a life in consumerism.

In this paper, by using the case of Singapore, I like to ask a question of whether the capability approach can save a good life in modern democracies under the influence of global capitalism. I will first consider the adverse affect consumerism can have on a good life, secondly I will examine Sen and Nussbaum's criticisms of the Singapore

¹ Chua Beng Huat, *Life is Not Complete Without Shopping: Consumption Culture in Singapore* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003), p. 17.

government to see if they are attentive to this paper's concern, and finally I will comment on missing points and possible refinements in the capability approach.

. Material Life in Singapore

A. Economic Development and Its Outcome

Upon its independence in 1965, Singapore was in need of "politics of survival." The country with little natural resources had to build a nation-state as quickly as possible in order to rejoin the global capitalism.

The Japanese Occupation during the Second World War had a major impact on the country, as damages to the political structure and economic and social infrastructure were tremendous. Social and economic disruptions were drastic; political consequences were only too apparent. Both British imperialism and Japanese military adventurism deepened the determination of the politically conscious elite to build a new nation.²

Today, the city-state with a population of 4.2 million is one of the richest countries in the world. Its Gross National Income per capita was \$23,090 (PPP) in 2002.³ Moreover, its citizens' length of life, knowledge and standard of living are also more than the world average. In Singapore, the average life expectancy at birth was 77.8 years and the average adult literacy rate for people over the age of 15 was 92.5 % in 2001. Combined primary, secondary and tertiary education gross enrolment ratio was 75 % in 2000/2001.⁴ Given the superior per capita income and the level of basic needs satisfaction, it seems fair to say that Singapore has succeeded in economic development.

² Ho Khai Leong, *Shared Responsibilities, Unshared Power: The Politics of Policy-Making in Singapore* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2003), p. 17.

³ <http://www.worldbank.org/cgi-bin/sendoff.cgi?page=%2Fdata%2Fcountrydata%2Fict.pdf&submit=Go> (June 22, 2004).

⁴ http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/2003/indicator/cty_f_SGP.html (June 22, 2004).

The architect of the Singaporean version of the so-called East Asian Miracle has been Lee Kuan Yew, former Prime Minister and present Senior Minister of Singapore. His reputation is both good and bad. For those who admire him, he is a great leader who built a nation-state and uplifted the living standard of its people. For example, he was invited to Vietnam as an economic advisor in 1992. On the other hand, for those who dislike him, he is a paternalist, even a dictator, who has interfered with people's freedom to a great extent. The usual judgment is a mix of two sides, for few people can deny that Singaporeans were in need of decent life materially and socially and that Singapore may have been not as wealthy as today if it was not him who was in charge. Lee has directed the country's course of development as a leader of People's Action Party (PAP) for the entire history of the Republic of Singapore.

The economic development brought a consumption culture to Singapore. As is well known, the country is a clean and green city-state packed with shopping stores and malls. Their degree of material consumption is high. Chua Beng Huat, who studies the sociology of shopping and consumption in Singapore, explains it as follows.

The country did not become independent until 1965, and the first generation of Singaporeans suffered material deprivations during economically underdeveloped colonial days. They responded to the government's drive with an equally single-minded determination, and subsequent generations kept up this effort, in employment, education and other forms of skills upgrading. After forty years of undisrupted PAP rule, consumption levels of Singaporeans have expanded across the entire society in tandem with economic development.⁵

Younger generations, who have no memory or personal experience of material deprivation, also live a life in consumerism. And many things they consume originate from foreign shores. Shopping streets and malls are lined with well-known international brands such as Nike and Louis Vuitton, not to mention such ubiquitous foreign franchises as McDonald's. Interestingly, however, those goods are well blended into the

⁵ Chua, *Life is Not Complete Without Shopping*, p. 3.

Singaporean scenes. By the cosmopolitan character of those products, Singaporeans can savor both a connection to home and the globe. Thanks to global corporations' clever marketing strategies, one can easily lose a sense of geographic location upon entering a shopping mall in Singapore.

B. Political Alienation

The economic development also generated political alienation among both people and government officials. Although the inputs from the public and grassroots to the political process are reportedly increasing in recent years,⁶ most people are indifferent to politics. Government officials, namely politicians and bureaucrats at the top level, act as if they are corporate chief executive officers. Efficiency and Effectiveness are their ultimate values.

Political alienation arose as "soft authoritarianism" was formed. Under the development-oriented authoritarian regime, political freedom of people was sacrificed for economic values. This is in spite of the fact that Singapore is officially a liberal democratic state. Article 14 of the Singapore Constitution clearly states:

- (a) every citizen of Singapore has the right to freedom of speech and expression;
- (b) all citizens of Singapore have the right to assemble peaceably and without arms;
- and
- (c) all citizens of Singapore have the right to form associations.

In practice, however, through the use of several measures including the Internal Security Act, these rights have been suppressed. The government has supervised the press so that criticism against the PAP is backward. The public housing system has served as a vehicle for controlling the behavior of people. Political participation and political competition have been regulated through various measures.

⁶ Ho, *Shared Responsibilities, Unshared Power*, Table 9.1, p. 348.

The people have of course not embraced the soft authoritarianism. Many “well established in their careers and quite well educated” have been emigrating from Singapore to Australia, as well as to other English-speaking countries, for reasons such as “limited freedom,” “authoritarian government,” “government control of daily life” and so forth.⁷ The “brain-drain” is a serious annoyance to the government of Singapore that the government is trying to tie a moral bond between the state and society by appealing to “Asian values.” Indeed, in 1989, the government officially set the national values as follows:

- (a) community over self;
- (b) upholding the family as the basic building block of society;
- (c) resolving major issues through consensus instead of contention;
- (d) stressing racial and religious tolerance and harmony.

Why would they need to set such values as official national values? According to Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, Singapore experienced a shift from communitarianism to individualism during the course of its economic development and was thus in need of preserving national values in the form of a national ideology. That is to say, it was in order to “immunize Singaporeans from the undesirable effects of alien influences and to bind them together as a nation.”⁸

The idea of “Asian values,” however, is dubious. Lee Kuan Yew praises what he calls “Asian values”---by which he actually means Confucian values, more than the values of Asia as a whole---to fight against the “pseudo-Westernization” of Singapore. According to Lee, parts of a total system of Western society, specifically the United States, are “guns, drugs, violent crime, vagrancy, unbecoming behavior in public---in sum the breakdown of civil society. The expansion of the right of the individuals to behave or

⁷ Gerald Sullivan and S. Gunasekaran, *Motivations of Migrants from Singapore to Australia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1994), p. 2 & P. 4.

⁸ Jon S. T. Quah, *In Search of Singapore’s National Values* (Singapore: Time Academy Press, 1990), p. 1.

misbehave as he pleases has come at the expense of orderly society.”⁹ Yet if the breakdown of traditional morals is occurring in Singapore as Lee implies—and it does appear to be occurring to the extent that it prompted a communitarian to remark: “Singapore would be better off with more patriotism” or with “a genuine sense of caring for the community”¹⁰—it is the outcome of consumerism fanned by global capitalism, not Westernization. As Chua notes:

The very visibility of a young person, all toggled-out in brand-name clothes, drinking wine and eating Italian food, *al fresco*, is an easy target of moral reproach, by his/her seniors, for being “Westernised”. This reproach signifies a fear of consumerism by investing too much credence in the common sense conception that ‘one is what one consumes’.¹¹

Western society is in fact a scapegoat of global capitalism in the Singapore government’s understanding. The government has too much faith in economic values to suspect the adverse effect that global capitalism can cause. The economic values are given priority in minds of government officials. In pursuit of economic values, the government treats people as means for growth rather than for their own good. Singapore’s educational system provides a good explanation for this. The system is comprised of 6 to 8 years of free but non-compulsory primary education, 4 to 5 years of secondary education of which only students with good scores can attain, 2 to 3 years of preparatory education for universities, and then universities into which students are apportioned according to their scores. In the fourth year of the primary education, students take a nationwide exam, the results of which largely determine their future. Only the smart can expand their capacities, while the rest will be left to serve as labors and consumers. No wonder many young people are hanging around shopping areas, as if they have nothing else to do. From the government’s point of view, this is an efficient and effective educational

⁹ Fareed Zakaria, “Culture is Destiny: A Conversation with Lee Kuan Yew,” *Foreign Affairs* 73(2) (1994): 111.

¹⁰ Daniel A. Bell, “A Communitarian Critique of Authoritarianism: The Case of Singapore,” *Political Theory* 25(1) (1997): 17.

¹¹ Chua, *Life is Not Complete Without Shopping*, p. 6.

system to produce the best and brightest for the state and to sustain the economic growth.

Is a life in Singapore good? Certainly, people at least have material well-being and therefore their lives are better than those politically alienated without material well-being. In International Development Theory, there are more urgent issues, such as dire poverty in Africa, to discuss. However, I believe that whether one can hold on to a life yesterday is also within the interests of the capability approach. Moreover, from a structural viewpoint, there is a connection between the high consumption in rich countries and poverty elsewhere. Therefore, by asking whether a consumer life in affluent democracies is good, we are actually asking two related questions: Is a life in consumerism good in terms of autonomy and of global justice?

. Evaluation by the Capability Approach

A. General Evaluation

Sen and Nussbaum have forged what they call “a philosophical and conceptual framework within which to discuss some urgent problems that arise in the course of “development,” especially economic development,”¹² known today as the capability approach. Consumerism and soft authoritarianism in Singapore are both serious problems, if not urgent, those have arisen in the course of its economic development and are therefore the subject of the capability approach.

In the light of the capability approach, Singapore’s economic success is not a real success, for a nation’s per capita income is not the only measure of quality of life. For example, according to the UNDP’s Human Development Index in 2003, Singapore ranks lower than Barbados, Cyprus, Portugal, Greece, Israel, New Zealand, and Spain, countries

¹² Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, “Internal Criticism and Indian Rationalist Traditions,” in Michael Krausz (ed.), *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), p. 299.

whose per capita GDP is lower than Singapore. The cause is its poorer performance in life expectancy at birth, adult literacy rate, and enrolment ratio in education. Besides, the inequality in income in Singapore is relatively high, for its Gini index shows 42.5, with the poorest 20 % of the population sharing 5.0 % of income/consumption and the richest 20 % sharing 49.0 % of income/consumption. Public expenditures on education and health as a percentage of GDP are distinctively low, particularly the latter, among high human development countries. Moreover, the status of major international human rights instruments as well as fundamental labor rights conventions are poor compared to other high human development countries¹³. Singapore's poor performance in these areas indicates that the country is postponing political values to economic values.

B. Evaluation by Sen

According to Sen, the capability approach is to see what individuals can do and can be. Poverty is not mere lowness of income: it is capability inadequacy. Development is an enlargement of each person's capability space, and here political freedoms, together with social and economic freedoms, play a central role. Sen puts;

[I]n the context of the narrower views of development in terms of GNP growth or industrialization, it is often asked whether certain political or social freedoms, such as the liberty of political participation and dissent, or opportunities to receive basic education, are or are not "conducive to the developments." In the light of the more foundational view of development as freedom, this way of posing the question tends to miss the important understanding that these substantive freedoms (that is, the liberty of political participation or the opportunity to receive basic education or health care) are among the *constituent components* of development. . . . As it happens, these freedoms and rights are *also* very effective in contributing to economic progress."¹⁴

¹³ http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/2003/pdf/hdr03_HDI.pdf (June 22, 2004).

¹⁴ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), p. 5.

As he points, political freedoms are not merely conducive to development. They have intrinsic values. In explaining how so, Sen raises the case of political failures like China's tragic Great Leap Forward. "Civil and political rights give people the opportunity not only to do things for themselves, but also to draw attention forcefully to general needs and to demand appropriate public action."¹⁵ Sen implies that without a democratic form of government and a relatively free press, disastrous consequences such as substantial famine could occur. Singapore, where the regime is authoritarian and the press is under the supervision of the government, is obviously no exception.

Hence, Sen is very critical of the government of Singapore. According to Sen, "the "Lee thesis"---that political and civil rights hamper economic growth" is wrong because "systematic statistical studies give no real support to the claim that there is a general conflict between political rights and economic performance."¹⁶ As some authoritarian states, namely Singapore, China, also South Korea until the late 1980's, and other Asian countries, have achieved fast economic growth in recent years, a democratic state can also achieve similar economic performance. Sen's counterproof is Botswana, "a real oasis of democracy" in Africa but "one of the fastest growing countries in the world."¹⁷ So Sen concludes, "the universal relevance of elementary freedoms permits a significant enriching of the normative perspective."¹⁸ In the light of his capability approach, therefore, quality of life in Singapore is far from high.

C. Evaluation by Nussbaum

According to Nussbaum, the capability approach sets a minimum limit or threshold level of a decent human life that should be secured by all governments. Her list of the central human capabilities includes: "Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life; having the right of political participation, protections of free

¹⁵ Amartya Sen, "Human Rights and Economic Achievements," in Joanne R. Bauer and Daniel A. Bell (eds.), *The East Asian Challenge for Human Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 92.

¹⁶ Sen, "Human Rights and Economic Achievements," p. 91.

¹⁷ Sen, "Human Rights and Economic Achievements," p. 91.

¹⁸ Sen, "Human Rights and Economic Achievements," p. 95.

speech and association.”¹⁹ Therefore, for Nussbaum, “phrases such as “Singapore success story” might have been harder to use had the measure of quality of life in terms of GNP per capita not been dominant in development policy.”²⁰ Thus, in the light of Nussbaum’s capability approach, Sen’s criticism of the “Lee thesis” is valid.

Sometimes accusations of “Westernizing” are made today against those who struggle for democracy and political liberties in totalitarian societies--but we usually know to greet such accusers with skepticism, asking whose interests are served by branding those concepts as alien Western intrusions into a culture’s tradition. For example, when the autocratic Singaporean leader Lee Kuan Yew proclaimed that the concept of freedom is alien to Asian culture, he did find some support, but he also encountered vigorous criticism.²¹

We cannot undo history. Even without the soft authoritarian regime, Singapore might have achieved the same success or might have been poorer. For the capability approaches considered here, the answer to the question of “if” is not important. Sen and Nussbaum clearly value political liberties more than economic efficiency and effectiveness. In the light of the capability approach, quality of life in Singapore is lower than the conventional way of evaluation, for Singapore lacks of political freedom. Then, will Singapore be relatively free from criticism once political freedom is secured to the level of, say, Europe and the United States, omitting the issue of gender and disability? More political liberties may indeed put an end to soft authoritarianism. But how about consumerism? Would people in Singapore stop pursuing a life in consumption culture once they receive more political freedoms? It’s very unlikely, as we know from the situations in high human development countries where political freedom and consumerism are marching hand in hand.

¹⁹ Martha Nussbaum, “Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements: Sen and Social Justice,” *Feminist Economics* 9 (2-3)(2003): 42.

²⁰ Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), n. 87, p. 81.

²¹ Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*, p. 37.

. A Missing Point in the Capability Approach

A. A Classical View of a Good Life

In the history of moral thought and philosophy, excess affluence has been regarded as a sign of a bad or undesirable life. For example, Aristotle identified happiness as the goal of life, but rejected wealth as means to it. Instead, he said that a happy life consisted of virtue, a middle path of moderation, or “a mean state.”

Virtue is concerned with feelings and actions, in which the excess is wrong and the deficit is blamed but the mean is praised and goes right; and both these circumstances belong to Virtue. Virtue then is in a sense of a mean state, since it certainly has an aptitude for aiming at the mean.²²

Therefore, if a person is not virtuous, the person is also unjust.

But the Unjust man does not always choose actually the greater part, but even sometimes the less; as in the case of things which are simply evil: still, since the less evil is thought to be in a manner a good and the grasping is after good, therefore even in this case he is thought to be grasping man, i.e., one who strives for more good than fairly falls to his share: of course he is also an unequal man, this being an inclusive and common term.²³

A virtuous person goes for a mean state between the extremes of excess and deficiency. Then, what exactly is the mean state? Unfortunately, Aristotle left the doctrine of the mean necessarily vague. It depends on a person's proper due. For Aristotle, a just distribution meant a distribution of wealth and honor according to a person's degree of contribution to a political society.

²² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106b20-30. The translation by D. P. Chase, Dover thrift edition, 1998, p. 27

²³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1129b10. Dover, p. 77.

B. Sen: Development as Freedom

For Sen, just distribution is what will achieve equality of basic capabilities. However, contents of basic capabilities are left necessarily vague in Sen's approach, too.

In the context of some types of social analysis, for example, in dealing with extreme poverty in the developing economies, we may be able to go a fairly long distance with a relatively small number of centrally important functionings and the corresponding basic capabilities (e.g. the ability to be well nourished and well sheltered, the capability of escaping avoidable morbidity and premature mortality, and so forth). In other contexts, including more general problems of economic development, the list may have to be much longer and much more diverse.²⁴

As Sen states, it is fair to claim that basic functionings cannot be listed. A person's functionings are a matter of the person's choice out of his/her capability space. A list of such functionings or evaluation of a person's quality of life in the light of such list will surely be "tremendously over-specified."²⁵ Nonetheless, is it also fair to say that basic capabilities cannot be listed? Obviously the answer is yes for Sen.

According to Sen, basic capabilities cannot be listed, for contents will vary according to individual persons who with differences act on his/her own rational judgment. However, since it is not practical to assess each person's quality of life by gathering all the individual data--such as his/her personal history, current situation, future prospects and so on--and then compare it with all the others, Sen uses a concept of basic capabilities, insisting that its contents vary from a society to society according to its culture and degree of economic development. Thus an idea of the universally minimum

²⁴ Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen (eds.), *The Quality of Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 31

²⁵ Nussbaum and Sen (eds.), *The Quality of Life*, p. 47.

level below which a decent human being is not allowed to fall is absent in Sen's capability approach.

How large a person's capability space can be is also not clear in Sen's approach. Since development means the expansion of freedom, not only the world's poor are encouraged to expand their capability spaces to break the chain of poverty, the world's rich are also encouraged to enlarge their capability spaces for self-realization. As elementary capabilities such as "being able to be adequately nourished" are important, more complex capabilities such as "being able to take part in social life" are also important. Is Sen suggesting that capabilities such as "being able to have a brand-name list watch" or "being able to attain a doctoral degree abroad" are also similarly important? Unfortunately, Sen's writings do not tell where to draw an objective line between the primary and the secondary capabilities.

Sen can leave the concept of basic capabilities vague because he believes that the costs for fulfilling everyone's basic capabilities be covered by the growth in global economy. That is why developing countries are recommended to join the club.

Indeed, many Asian economies---first Japan, and then South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, and later post-reform China and Thailand and other countries in East Asia and Southeast Asia---have done remarkably well in spreading the economic opportunities through an adequately supportive social background, including high levels of literacy, numeracy, and basic education; good general health care; completed land reforms; and so on. The lesson of opening of the economy and the importance of trade has been more easily learned in India than the rest of the message from the same direction of the rising sun.²⁶

In his view, with an adequate device for social justice, global capitalism can deliver more capabilities to individuals.

²⁶ Sen, *Development as Freedom*, p. 91.

Therefore, it is difficult to draw an answer to the question of whether a life in consumerism is good in terms of a person's autonomy from Sen's capability approach. Singapore is a mirror of capitalism. It reflects the nature and future of this economic arrangement. Cosmopolitan goods that may affect people's concept of a good life will be incoming to the country one after another. The recently signed Free Trade Agreement between Singapore and the United States, which prompted Singapore to lift its ban on chewing gum, offers a good example of how economic values can easily alter political values. If the government keeps promoting consumerism, that is at the same time to make people constantly dissatisfied with what they have and what they are now. They will feel left short and under the pressure to keep up with trends. The government of Singapore must take some measures against global capitalism if it wants to secure people's autonomy. Nevertheless, it's unlikely to happen, for the legitimacy of the government rests on the delivery of cosmopolitan goods.

For Sen, a solution is to secure more political freedom. Although in the contemporary world the "sun does not set on the empire of Coca-Cola or MTV,"²⁷ how we should deal with these cosmopolitan goods is a democratic choice. By democratic Sen means that everyone in a society has capabilities to participate in public discussion or in social decision.

This is an issue of some seriousness, but it is up to the society to determine what, if anything, it wants to do to preserve old forms of living, perhaps even at significant economic cost. Ways of life can be preserved if the society decides to do just that, and it is a question of balancing the cost of such preservation with the value that the society attaches to the objects and the lifestyles preserved. There is, of course, no ready formula for this cost-benefit analysis, but what is crucial for a rational assessment of such choices is the ability of the people to participate in public discussion on the subject.²⁸

²⁷ Sen, *Development as Freedom*, p. 240.

²⁸ Sen, *Development as Freedom*, pp. 241-242.

Obviously Sen is a strong believer of a democratic choice. In reality, people can adapt their tastes to cosmopolitan goods easily and therefore a democratic choice can quite often turn out to be against preserving old forms. The voting behavior of Singaporeans suggests that they would go for new forms. In Singapore, despite various unfair means that the PAP employs to gain votes, people could choose not to vote for the party if they were truly dissatisfied. Thus the voting turnouts show some truths about people's will. For example, the voting percentage for the PAP was 75 % in the 2001 general election, 10% higher than the 1997 general election. This was because people chose to vote for the PAP in the hope for economic recovery from the Asian crisis in the late 1990s. One implication here is that Singaporeans are accepting the PAP, though perhaps out of force of habit, because the party has been successfully providing them with economic opportunities.

It is also hard to draw an answer from Sen's writings to the question of whether a life in consumerism is good in terms of global justice. Environmental issues can provide good examples of how one party's over-consumption of natural resources can affect the rest of the world. Natural resources are so scarce that fair distribution of them matters to a great degree. In fact, in similar way, fair distribution also matters in the case of basic capabilities, for capabilities require resources. Then, it may be unjust for people in affluent societies to pursue so many capabilities for higher self-esteem while many others are doing with much less. Since Sen appears to believe in global economic growth, his concern for the global distributive justice is not as high as one would expect.

C. Nussbaum: Threshold as Minimum

In her capability approach, Nussbaum lists the central human capabilities as "a bare minimum of what respect for human dignity requires."²⁹ The governments of all around the world are expected to provide its people with those capabilities. They can as rights enable people to live "with a full menu of opportunities and liberties, and thus be able to have lives that are worthy of the dignity of human beings: this political goal should

²⁹ Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*, p. 5.

constrain all economic choices. Justice takes priority in social reflection; contrary to what some economists think.³⁰ However, since Nussbaum's primary objective is to secure a basic social minimum everywhere, a life in consumerism is not a critical issue in her approach. One can guess from her list whether such a life is good or not, yet it is hard to tell because one can consume a large amount of cosmopolitan goods and still retain, say, imagination and emotions, which are among the basic capabilities within the lists.

As for the question regarding global justice, she is more attentive to the issue than Sen. Actually she is very critical of Sen in this matter. According to her, "Sen's "perspective of freedom" is too vague."³¹ Moreover, she has been arguing that his "approach will actually backfire, preventing us from criticizing freedoms, that do harm to the most vulnerable people, such as the freedom to pollute, the freedom to harass in the workplace, and so forth."³² Therefore, she endorses her list of the central human capabilities in order to differentiate them from those that may impinge upon other people's freedoms. What can be suggested here is that someone's freedom to excite desire for, say, Mercedes in the developing countries or to buy an extra car in order to satisfy one of his/her many wants may also impinge upon someone else's freedom to use a community bus or to live on the old oil lands, one of a few social bases of his/her self-respect. In fact, Nussbaum has developed the idea of distributive justice on the international level.³³ The world's rich are obliged to curtail their freedom to pursue a life in consumerism in order to save enough for the world's poor. How much the former has to curtail by what principles are yet to be answered.

. Conclusion

³⁰ Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*, p. 33.

³¹ Nussbaum, "Capabilities a Fundamental Entitlements: Sen and Social Justice," p. 33.

³² Martha Nussbaum, "On Hearing Women's Voices: A Reply to Susan Okin," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 32(2)(2004): 193-194.

³³ Martha Nussbaum, "Duties of Justice, Duties of Material Aid: Cicero's Problematic Legacy," in Angela Kallhoff (ed.), *Martha C. Nussbaum: Ethics and Political Philosophy* (Munster: LIT, 2001), p. 39-40.

The capability approaches developed by Sen and Nussbaum are not yet ready to evaluate quality of life in affluent democracies. The question whether a life in consumption culture is good in terms of autonomy and of global justice is left answered. If we aim for cosmopolitan equality of basic capabilities, i.e., a state in which everyone can stand on the threshold level on human decency, it may necessary to be critical of the highly material life enjoyed in the affluent societies.

From the normative perspective, perhaps it is time for us to reflect on our own lives and see if they are good. Ours may be more troublesome than the lives of people whom we tend to think are in need of more capabilities. Hence, it would contribute to the development of the capability approach if we take up the normative view of this paper and amplify its application to the lives in affluent democracies. How serious we take the point will set a limit on the capability approach: whether the capability approach should focus on evaluation of quality of life in developing countries and of lives of minorities or should aim at becoming a guideline of ethical global development.