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Title: From socially sustainable freedom to political liberalism? — Nussbaum on freedom in the market society¹

“Moral philosophy has always involved three aspects.
The first can be termed interpretative, the second normative,
and the third educational/self-educational of therapeutic”
(Agnes Heller: *General Ethics*)

1 Two objections to Nussbaum’s theory of human freedom

Nussbaum has formulated one of the most profound theories of human freedom in recent years. To anyone who finds the Kant-Hegel or the liberalism-communitarianism debate important this might be the position to stick to. It seems to have grasped and integrated the best in Aristotle, Stoicism, Mill and Kant. A striking feature is how it balances between classical oppositions while still forming a critical position. It may be the best theory not only of individual freedom but also of what we might call socially sustainable freedom. In this paper I will focus on her balance between three interesting oppositions. Out of these balances comes in many eyes a critical position which works to the advantage of human freedom and flourishing.

However, her view has not been uncontested. Following David A. Crocker, the capabilities approach is open to the following objections:

Firstly, one might criticise Nussbaum for lacking a concept of when enough is

¹ In this paper, which is to be presented at the poster session at the 3rd Conference on the Capability Approach: From Sustainable Development to Sustainable Freedom, 7-9 September 2003, University of Pavia, Italy, I try to sketch a PhD-project I have recently begun. I welcome any comments, criticisms and advice on how to move on. My plan on how to move on is to read 1) more Hegel, 2) Kate Soper’s *Theory of Need*, 3) Nancy Fraser and 4) Agnes Heller in general.

enough and therefore of lacking an instrument for criticizing individual over-consumption (i.e. giving us a guide as to how much we actually need). Moreover, it claims that according to the capabilities approach people's well being in affluent societies would require abundant if not opulent goods and services. Considering how "there has been a sense that our appetites are insatiable and that we are trapped in a never-ending escalation of our sense of the minimal level of consumption", we get little or no guidance as to how much is enough (Crocker (ed): *Ethics of consumption*).

Secondly, the capabilities approach could be said to concern only personal choices not social structures. The second critique "faults the capabilities approach for paying exclusive attention to personal choice and neglecting the ways in which the socio-economic system closes (or opens) choice and damages (or promotes) individual well-being. The approach amounts to a merely personal ideal that fails to assess social structures. The result, alleges the objection, is an uncritical acceptance, if not endorsement, of current institutions and policies (Crocker, 383f)."

To be fair, Nussbaum has given answers to both objections, and Crocker has accepted these. However, my claim would be that there is a bias in Nussbaum's position concerning individual's personal choices on the one hand and the structures of society and value criteria of a critical culture on the other. In order to test it I will focus on how more hidden structures form our life possibilities. If such 'hidden structures' are real it is not unimportant, as this 'capitalist lifestyle' is being 'sold' throughout the world and adapted by far more and more of the world's population. Moreover, if such hidden trends and structures shape our lives in an unfree direction, and the capabilities approach is actually able to diagnose this, it might often have to leave things as they are. This, I will claim, is due largely to Nussbaum's latest development. Her theory might be the best we have, but I think it important to consider positions, which are stronger on the cultural and institutional dimension, if I am right in my scepticism. Exactly because her writings show such a caring and deep philosophy with a strong commitment to progress and human flourishing, it is worth working on making it even stronger.

In order to test whether Nussbaum presents us with a really strong theory of socially sustainable freedom, my claim will be that we need to consider what is maybe the largest and most important need and preference shaping social area of the

modern world, namely the market society. Thus, this paper is about the balances in Nussbaum's work and its potentials for social criticism in the context of market society and consumer culture. This is an interesting test-area because many of us have first hand experiences with it every day, and some of us a biased view on it. On the one hand it is the ultimate symbol of freedom and on the other it is an area where most of us realise that we are being manipulated. Focusing on the market society also has the advantage of bringing together the three axes' where Nussbaum tries to find a balanced and critical position. Also the market society is a classical focus for studies of whether the modern world advances our freedom or whether we are furthered away from the central aspects of life. Here, we hope that Nussbaum's balanced view will show us both the possibilities and challenges in the market society and that her view could still be seen as critical towards consumer society when this works against our true socially sustainable freedom.

2 The three oppositions

Coming back to Nussbaum's position, a first description of the three oppositions will be:

(1) Materialism versus anti-materialism. According to Crocker the capabilities approach gives us a good, balanced combination of the best in materialism and anti-materialism, i.e. the position that human life always improve when we have more material goods versus the view of a religious person or ecologist who is forsaking the material world because it takes us away from our true well-being. Nussbaum acknowledge that materialism sometimes does promote dissatisfaction, but also argues that humans have material needs which must be met if we are to become truly human.

Nussbaum describes how lack of material support may intrude on freedom. The capabilities approach famously challenges the way of understanding human development as reducible to or intimately connected to wealth, income, and possessions in a narrow sense. On the other hand, it firmly shows how material needs must be met if we are to become truly human. Even though she underscores how much people are in need of material goods, the capabilities approach has given us a much-needed critique of 'homo economicus' and an alternative focus on the central

aspects of the human life. Nussbaum has in articles and lectures added some thoughts about consumerism to the capabilities approach. In “Aristotelian Social Democracy” her comments on these matters were even very critical of the common outlook on wealth:

“Wealth, income, and possessions simply are not good in themselves. (?) The Aristotelian insists that more is not, in fact, always better, where wealth and income are concerned. (?) This is a heretical and deeply peculiar thought, to those brought up in liberal capitalism. (?) To Aristotelianism, by contrast, the thought is not peculiar, but obvious and central. (?) Too much wealth may produce excessive competitiveness, or excessive focus on technical and managerial tasks, distracting people from social interaction, from the arts, from learning and reflecting.” On the other hand when the women from Uttar Pradesh did not object to having only dirty water to drink, Nussbaum made it very clear how wrong their adaptation was.

(2) In consumer culture some would describe our needs as insatiable. Closely connected to this is the question of whether they are so formed through institutions or if we are so by nature? Do we as individuals have a stable nature (for instance as mere pleasure seeking egoists) or whether we are formed by the historically shaped society and culture we live in. Nussbaum balances between a universal list of fundamental capabilities and sensitivity concerning cultural formation. (2) According to Nussbaum, the capabilities are on the one hand the same through out history and flexible and formable by culture on the other. In order to get a deeper understanding of Nussbaum’s position on this, one might have to refer to some passages from her brilliant book *The Therapy of Desire*. Here she describes Epicurus as very critical towards how society deform our needs and wants, but she also shows how his answer to this was an unacceptable withdrawal from society and a lowering of ones aspirations in life. Choosing an ascetic life form in order to free one self is not a solution Nussbaum wants. Aristotle on the other hand, whom Nussbaum is in agreement with, is also critical towards the common mans immediate sayings about the good life, but he still believed that human beings cannot be all wrong, just as he believed that everybody has something to contribute to the truth about the good life. These thoughts enable Nussbaum to be critical towards how social hierarchy and suppression of women may form their self-viewed life-possibilities.

(3) Individualism versus civic humanism. Nussbaum balances between positions

that are strong on individuals independent choices (individuals should choose for themselves) and those, which are strong on describing how our lives are shaped and made possible by 1) socio-psychological structures, 2) common goals and 3) meaningful social life forms. Nussbaum often tries critically to diagnose social formation and adaptive preferences, but in the end wants to leave it up to people to choose for themselves. The capabilities approach makes up a unique combination of individual and social aspects of freedom. On the one hand, her theory of freedom is inspired by Mills position of individual experimentalism and the Kantian idea of each person as an end. If we are to blossom as human like flourishing trees we must find our own paths in life. The individual has to make the fundamental choices in her own life. In this sense affiliation, inter-subjective recognition and collective material support are instruments for personal self-fulfilment. The capabilities approach is basically about autonomy and finding ones way, forming ones practical reason in order to choose ones way in life.

On the other hand, Nussbaum knows how fragile human beings are, and how much individuals are in need of social support, comfort, love and friendships in order to gain the fundamental capabilities. Nussbaum is very careful in showing how we are often fooled into believing things about our place and possibilities in the social world. This is again obvious in the case of the Indian women whose personal narratives Nussbaum so carefully describes. She carefully shows why social formation is necessary for individual well being and how social deformation and adaptive preferences should and could be avoided.

I think Nussbaum in all three cases shows how her theory has a strong critical and diagnostic potential when it comes to systematic and everyday challenges to human freedom. Even though her position is balanced, it still leaves room for substantial criticism.

3 Cultural enslavement? Pathology in the modern age

In order to get a first idea of what these hidden structures could be I will focus on our modern capitalist ways of spending time and money in the culture of consumption. When it comes to how we spend time, Juliet B. Schor has described a familiar scheme in her book *The Overworked American*. She describes a phenomenon also very familiar to me from my experiences in Denmark, namely how

trying to connect work and family life to many people promotes stress. She argues that, contrary to many people's beliefs, there has been a decline in leisure time due to overwork. She finds reports showing that in the US population leisure time have declined one-third since the early 1970s. Consequently, people are spending less time on the basics, like sleeping and eating, and parents are devoting less attention to their children (p 5). Of course one may object that work is not considered waste of time or life by most people in the modern west, but still one might feel that many of the 'liberating' managerial buzzwords and theories praising how free and flexible we are, are just fooling us into working more.

Another aspect is how we spend our money. A survey showed that most car owners in Denmark had to work one whole day every week in order to pay for the car. Having a car is 'sold' as giving us more freedom and as a time saver, but actually it takes up a whole working day of time to pay for it — something we might not want to think about if we want to retain our picture of our selves as freely taking part in the market society.

Lodziak presents 'the manipulation of need theses'. The thesis is typically exemplified by reference to the power of media and advertising in making us 'need' things we do not really need. To take an example from my own everyday experience, everyone I know suddenly have a mobile phone, which has changed the conduct and habits of my surroundings, and has become an issue which takes up time in conversations. I sense that others expect me to buy one and are insulted if I do not want one. I am sure that if I finally bought one, they would get upset if I was unconnected for a second. Nobody seems to ask whether the invention of the mobile phone was the answer to a need everybody had a few years ago? Who started all this? Who invented this need?

We might describe the situation in the language of Habermas as 'the colonisation of the life world'. The capitalist system is said to be attaining a life of its own which is increasingly organising our actions. Areas of life, which were once open to democratic control or left to individuals, are now followed by formal regulation and the tendency to commodify experiences and human relations. Following Lodziak's analysis in *Manipulating needs* commercial interests have increasingly colonized areas as child rearing and recreation. Thus, the majority of people have, according to Lodziak, been steered toward a trivial and relatively meaningless form of autonomy.

Car owning is again an obvious example. Commercial interests have changed the city structure, and thus travel time to and from work have made ownership of a car a basic necessity. Lodziak adds to the thesis that fragmented free time is more suited to consumption than to exercise of autonomy. Thus, he concludes: “Enslavement exits at the core of our most celebrated freedom.”

4 The historical background

In order to test Nussbaum’s position, let us consider the historical sociological-philosophical background for the opposition between pessimists and optimists concerning the market society. One way of describing this opposition in view on the so-called market society would be like this:

“On the one hand ‘market society’ was a way of imagining a modernity liberated from tradition and collective bonds in which a rational social order could emerge spontaneously from the market-coordinated actions of free and rational individuals. On the other hand, ‘market society’ represented the domination of an implacable logic of quantification and formal rationality over social life, producing inequality, social disorder, loss of substantive values and a destruction of both the individual and social relations.” (Slater & Tonkiss: *Market Society*, s 197.) Don Slater in *Consumer Culture & Modernity* presents some of the background thoughts for some of the forgotten discussions in to day’s social theory namely the groundbreaking theories of needs and of their social forming.

4.1 Optimists

First, let us have a look on the optimist on the question of materialism. For Smith and Hume, putting limits on our needs would neither be morally nor economically good. They argued that we do not just work in order to produce the supply of our ‘three humble necessities, food, cloths, and lodging’, but to produce conveniences according to our taste. Thereby we not only improve and multiply the materials, but also produce ‘all the variety of the arts.’ Thus, “Progress in both culture and civilization depends on the expansion of desire.” (Smith, Slater, 63).

Coming to the question of needs the optimist liberal tradition, from Hobbes and onwards, argued that our needs are *naturally insatiable*. Therefore intensity of individual desire and greed was to be seen as the engine of progress. Hobbes was probably the first to equate the absence of desire not with virtue, but with personal and social death (Slater 60). “*Amour-propre*, social competition, the imagined needs produced by culture and human association are not, a new form of slavery, or simply a spur to keep us on the treadmill of economic growth. They are necessary to the general advancement of human civilization. Indeed, as Hume puts it, perhaps the chief advantage which arises from a commerce with strangers is not economic exchange but the cultural intercourse through which we are exposed to new possibilities, new needs” (Slater 64).

Coming to the third area, Hume and Smith argue that ‘consideration on the part of the others is not a form of moral corruption but the very basis of morality and social solidarity, and the basis of emulation is to a very large extent an innate human desire for aesthetic pleasure, a drive to culture. Thus, Smith and Hume anchor both morality and self-interest in a desire to be approved of by others.

4.2 Pessimists

My focus in this paper brings me next to the pessimists concerning consumer society. In order to get a first impression of where there might be a problem in Nussbaum’s position I will seek out which arguments they have presented to show that we are being manipulated and are fooling our selves in the market society — even if we believe we are free. The pessimistic way of describing the situation we find in Rousseau, Hegelian-Marxism, Durkheim and the Frankfurt School. They agree with Nussbaum, Hume and Smith, that peoples choices are not made in a vacuum, and that we are not unaffected by cultural trends. But they believe that many of these trends which claim to foster our freedom instead take up much of our wakening time and make us focus less on the central areas of life. Even if the trends sell themselves as positive and emancipatory, often they are not. Instead we need to ask: How much do we actually need?

They start out by acknowledging that the needs of the individual in a deregulated and affluent society let loose human desires which are in principle insatiable, but they

see this as a pathological symptom rather than a vehicle of progress. According to Durkheim: “One no longer knows what is fair, what are legitimate claims and hopes, and which are excessive. As a result, there is nothing to which one does not aspire (?) Appetites no longer accept limits to behaviour since public opinion cannot restrain them” (Thompson: *Readings from Emile Durkheim*, p 110). Also they tend to stress that the so called vehicle of progress is actually dissatisfaction.

Consumerism is only promoted by creating dissatisfaction with ones situation together with a promise of satisfactions. This also affects the goods we have already achieved. What often happens is that the recently purchased item only provides temporary pleasure. It quickly becomes a taken-for-granted-object, and the individual experience dissatisfaction. Thus, they conclude, however much the economy produces, it will always produce frustration and dissatisfaction.

Coming thirdly to the aspect of individualism, the pessimists argue that what follows from consumerism is, a social and political withdrawal, compelled with a central focus on family and domestic life (see Charles Taylor: *Sources of the Self*). According to Lodziak, antithetical to the more universalistic concerns of emancipatory movements (like Nussbaum’s) there is a widespread tendency that people place their energies in private solutions and struggles as answer to the problems they face. Lodziak argues that ‘privatism’ is sold as a solution to the problem of meaninglessness, but that it does not bring the cure it promises. The atomistic individual is left alone with her problems. Our potential freedom has become so individually centred that we believe that an individual fares in life is essentially due to his or hers own efforts. All this promotes an anti-collective ethics. To those who do fail we tell them to blame themselves rather than directing their frustration and anger at the social system. This tendency which Lodziak find in The West is what Nussbaum found in the Indian caste system.

Some of the pessimists long a period of traditional social order, where culture subordinate wants to higher values, instead of letting consumer culture dream up ever more needs and enslaving people to a vicious circle of unceasing need feeding off perpetual dissatisfaction. Deregulated society exercise a deep form of corruption and compulsion over its disoriented members then, instead of providing a moral framework for meaningful individual and collective life, now (Slater: 1997, 77). They believe that in the absence of a coherent cultural formation to map out the individual a

legitimate and limited agenda of needs, values and commanding social aims, insatiable need 'can only be a source of torment to itself'.

Many of them believe also that society alone can perform this moderating role: 'for it is the only moral power superior to the individual.' They feel unhappy with liberalism because they believe it reduces society to individuals. Durkheim argue, that "In everyday life, the expansion of individual need unconstrained by the moral authority of culture or society is a source of personality disturbance and of the profound confusion of modernity." (Slater, 59, Thompson, 109).

5 Nussbaum on the capabilities and consumer society.

In the light of this description from the history of social need theory I want to challenge Nussbaum's position. The central question in this paper will be on whether Nussbaum leans to the Hobsian side of the balance. So far I have presented Nussbaum's position as basically critical towards consumer culture, even if I have tried to show how I in the end feel that she is somewhat biased or in need of supplement, when it comes to what I have described as a growing impact of the culture of consumption on other areas of life. I have presented two well-known critiques: One being that she lacks a concept of when enough and enough; the other being that her approach is too individualistic and not good enough to analyse the impact of social structures. I still want to use Crocker's two formulated critiques but make them into one question in the light of the history of social thought, I presented, focusing on how habits and needs are formed through social processes: 'Does the capabilities approach take enough into consideration how our needs, preferences and wants are shaped by social processes in the market society?' However, when it comes to a critical description of consumer culture I think there is a tendency that on all three areas in her position the balance is actually uneven: we do not criticise over consumption enough, we allow ourselves to be manipulated in wanting things we do not need, and we are not good enough at forming social, meaningful common goals to oppose this culture. If this diagnosis is true I want to be able to use Nussbaum's theory to get us back on the right track. The problem is that because people in affluent countries are often above the basic level of the capabilities approach it cannot object if they choose a degrading lifestyle. If the capabilities approach does not help us I

cannot see it as promoting socially sustainable freedom. I will add to my claim that there might be a problem if we only find the fleshed out capabilities in our society in shape of market society and consumer culture. This might inflict on whether we feel able to live out life forms which run contrary to consumer culture. To take the obvious example: Are you free to live without a car? Answering this means answering questions like: Is the public transportation good enough, but also: Are you ashamed of not owning a car? Is your kid being teased in school because his parents do not have a car?

In order to get my argument working, I have to show that consumption of material goods is ‘part of’ the human capabilities. This is obvious when it comes to food, shelter and cloth, but I think also when it comes to the capabilities of being able to take part in social life (which often means having money to spend), being able to appear in public without shame (again something which often involves having a certain amount of material goods, like ‘nice’ cloth), being able to own things and being able to cherish certain things as our own. This of course does not imply that we necessarily need a consumer *culture*, but what I want to claim is that in capitalist-like consumer culture the capabilities *are* connected to consumption in a strong sense. Actually, this might go for most of the capabilities. Consider a capability like play: think of the many brands we can — and often will have to — choose from if we want to play tennis or give our son a computer game. Sport and commercials and strongly connected in the world of today. Think also of the use of ones imagination. According to Bobock, capitalism is based on imagination: ‘We motivate people to become consumers in fantasy as well as reality’. We use our imagination to dream up fantasies about how a new good might improve our life. Experiencing nature is also not possible to some people without all kinds of equipment. Even the so-called architectonic capabilities are influenced. She tells us that affiliation and practical reason is what has to be developed if we are to choose freely. However, again, both practical reason and affiliation in a modern capitalist life of consumption have a lot to do with consumption of material goods. We use our everyday practical reason when we consider which things to spend money on. Buying a bigger car which claim more working time for us to pay for on the one hand but will enable us both to impress our friends and to drive with them or to meet them on the other. Many of our material choices demand for our practical reason and have strong effects on what kind of a life

we are going to live. Furthermore, affiliation and social recognition plays a major part in how these choices are made. Therefore, I argue that in capitalist like consumer cultures it seems that even the central capabilities are very often strongly tight up with the culture of consumerism. Considering this enormous impact consumer culture has in the shaping of everyday life (and, potentially, in deforming of our wants and preferences) one may wonder whether Nussbaum's theory takes adequately into consideration the social dimensions of individual freedom.

6 The development in the theory of Nussbaum.

Bearing the quote from the article "Aristotelian Social Democracy" (ASD) in mind Nussbaum certainly is critical of over consumption. When only considering the article ASD it is hard to see why Crocker's critiques seemed so urgent. In ASD she clearly criticizes rawlsian liberalism for failing both to see 1) that more is not always better; 2) that there are great individual differences in need (i.e. physical & social) — and that we therefore need a deeply socially structured programme. Also, following the strain of the second critique Nussbaum showed in ASD how the Aristotelian would arrange for social institutions (i.e. public food programs because it is good that even the poor should be part of the public life).

Now let us consider her position in WHD. In WHD Nussbaum still has something to say to the first criticism. She still claims Rawls focuses too much on wealth and income (p 69). However, this point is not central anymore. It literarily reappears in a footnote (note 86 to the list, 10b, Material: being able to hold property):

"The current version of the list still insists that more property is not ipso facto better, but it expands the role of property rights, seeing the intimate relationship between property rights and self-definition. [?] However, it is also important to think of their absolute value, as supports for other valuable forms of human functioning. Thus, all citizens should have some property, real or moveable, in their own names. The amount requisite will properly be deliberated by each state in the light of its economic situation." Does she really mean "state" or merely custom. If she does mean state, then it could be interpreted as a strong criterion. But again, to Nussbaum it might only says something about a minimum.

Coming to the second critique, one could mention when she talks about social differences and adaptive preferences. In WHD she still claims that Rawls fails to see how much individuals differ when it comes to needs and ability to convert resources into valuable functioning. Another example is her theory of the role of the family. The aim is not to secure status quo and to support an institution like the family no matter what but to secure and foster the kinds of common life forms, which support the human capabilities. (Now we touch upon the third area Nussbaum balances.) Thus, Nussbaum argues: “You didn’t just find the family lying around; you constituted it in one way, through the tradition of property law; now we shall constitute it in another way, one that protects women’s capabilities.”

However, as we know, in *Women and Human Development* (WHD) Nussbaum has changed her position into a ‘political liberalism’, which sets the ‘fact of pluralism’ in life goals even more at the centre. Thus, I will argue that the balance in Nussbaum’s position has changes a little in the direction of individualism. According to Nussbaum, above a certain level it is up to each and everyone to choose whether we want to devote our time on the central capabilities or whether we want to focus on only some of them and leave some untainted. Thus, one may choose to live a life, where affiliation, play and imagination is never found in a raw form (without money spending and consumption). This might make Nussbaum’s position work, if we were not subject to mass consumption. Still there are many questions which need to be discussed and answered. I guess some might question whether it really does change the capabilities that they are only lived out in a world of consumption. Others will argue that we actually have to experience a life without these things at its core in order freely to choose to live it.

7 Discussion of Nussbaum

Does all this make Nussbaum’ approach a socially sustainable development in the definition: “a development which implies that public policies – geared towards economic, social and ecological issues – do not generate social dysfunctionings (exclusion, poverty, conflicts) in such a way that they jeopardise the capacity of current and future generations to improve their well-being”? (As quoted from the conference program describing the theme of socially sustainable freedom). At first,

yes, especially when we consider poor countries. who have not yet met the basics on Nussbaum's list. Considering how Nussbaum has argued strongly for transferring wealth from the north to the south (SPD lecture 1. February 2002) this is actually a universal plan.

Nevertheless, if the approach is also valid for more developed capitalist countries it is in need of comments about what we have seen described as an unfree individualistic tendency to over consumption. There is surely an 'intimate relationship between property rights and self-definition,' as Nussbaum writes, but this is not necessarily 'good' as our 'needs' are partly shaped by our culture. Moreover, for a poor woman to own something for herself might be an important instrument in the process of defining her own identity, but the fact that something is an instrument for a capability does not automatically make it a capability.

We need an approach that opens up for cultural criticism when people systematically want to own things they do not need. Because Nussbaum's approach is now 'political not comprehensive' it stops before defining this intimate relationship further as it might interfere with how people lead their lives and her ideal of each person as an end. Like I said at the beginning, she is strongly influenced by Mill and Kant who would argue that nobody has a good guideline for everybody on how to live their lives in full. Her own contribution is very much to show how much actually can be said about how free action might be possible, but she only defines instrumental social goods.

This is visible when Nussbaum defends her antipaternalistic position (i.e. capabilities not actual functioning as a goal):

"What about practical reason and sociability, the two architectonic functions? (...) To impose political disabilities on someone because they defer to astrologers, or new age guru, or some more traditional source of authority in making important decisions seems to me quite inappropriate." (WHD 131)

I quote this because I think that Nussbaum's own thinking about this paternalist challenge to her theory and on how to answer it has made her change certain formulations in her theory, which makes her theory less critical to might be obstacles to freedom (i.e. the ASD quote compared to the WHD quote). In the passage, what Nussbaum considers is individual critique. One might want to add that one thing is personal choice and individual critique, but another thing is social formation and

cultural critique. Would Nussbaum not have to add thoughts on how there is a public task of making cultural life forms present in order to make meaningful choices possible (as Lodziak argues) and in discerning hidden social structures which goes against our well-being?

The problem with a critical balanced position is obvious, as the two oppositions will often conflict. We want people to live a flourishing life, but sometimes we stumble on hard cases where it is hard to say what we promote. Nussbaum talks about how widows in India are feeling worse about their actually bad situation as they hear about how women in the west lead their lives. This Nussbaum sees as a vehicle for progress, but it does make the women miserable. Of course one would have to distinguish between being below the level of human life Nussbaum describes and living in an affluent society.

Even harder it gets if a culture is based not so much on obvious strong hierarchies, obvious oppression of women etc. but on more hidden action guiding and habit-forming structures like spending money and time on things, which potentially takes us away from the central aspects of the good human life, shouldn't a theory like Nussbaum's have something to say? What if central parts social of the good life like human relationships, love, friendship and kinship are more and more formed and mediated by material goods?

Being 'adequately' nourished may have one meaning when people are poor and food is not available and another in a rich country where eating too much of the wrong kinds of fast food might be the problem. In a rich country like Denmark a considerable part of to days young people are malnourished whereas the elderly do not eat enough. In general, people are more concerned with spending enormous amounts on new kitchens than on good food. Buying the cheapest food of lowest standard and exporting the best, is part of Danish culture. In order to explain the behaviour of the individual Danes one would have to consider the historical development of this culture. Using the capabilities approach to criticise people not being adequately nourished would be possible if people have no food – but not in Denmark considering Nussbaum's argument in the quote.

Another problem is that Nussbaum 'arbitrarily' criticises the family but wants to stick to the right to own property. She claims the argument to be based on the thoughts of the Indian women she has interviewed and what these things meant in their

specific situation. This doesn't give us a guide line as how two find a critical balance in the future, expect maybe if we interpret Nussbaum's choice as the most emancipatory outcome, but that would be extremely vague.

8 Things we need to take into consideration

The next step for me will be to go into other theories, which might give the capabilities approach, a supplement of social theory. We remember how Lodziak commented on the third area Nussbaum balances. One of the problems he sees concerns the dominant cultural trend known as the culture of individualism and privatism (75). Daily we are confronted with a specific picture of the self coming from Hobbes. We are told that we are mere egoists and we are offered to satisfy our needs in the market place. This 'homo economicus' is a role model we are presented with in the areas of life which were once areas of alternative humanistic role models. However this new role model does not seem to give us the satisfaction it promises. This is the main reason why we now live in a culture obsessed with self-identity, and where consumerism is seen as essential for identity. There is an ethos of self-growth, which in many ways has become an 'industry' (Taylor: *Ethics of Authenticity*). Especially young people (whom we are all told to follow) are continuously involved in constructing and reconstructing their identities. Our culture is filled with the problematic and pathological aspects of this ethos. Action on ones own will, choosing ones own life plan is a beautiful ideal in this culture of authenticity, which inspired by romantic ideals. But it has to acknowledge how hard it is to make this work in practice and what we are up against. It is not that consumer motivation, especially among the affluent are that strong. This could be exemplified with how TV is the dominant leisure activity in the west, but also one of the activities people are most prepared to give up for some other leisure activity. This could be an obvious challenge to the capabilities approach. Lodziak argues that much consumption like television viewing is conducted in a routine way, without any really strong desires. We just do it. Those who are most subject to this kind of action are those whose range of action is restricted by limited resources. Thus, Lodziak concludes, why people do 'this' could well be because they do not have the resources to do 'that'. Therefore Lodziak argues, we have to create conditions that enable the experience of

meaningfulness, which has to involve autonomy. We need culture as a critical social ideal to regulate the debasement of values under modern conditions (Slater: “Affluence and disorder”, 57). Slater mentions Durkheim as one of those who most stoutly asserted the necessary moral and cultural authority of society. Lodziak stress that the real problem is not constructing an identity but how to construct a meaningful identity. Often the opportunities that do exist are not satisfying. Moreover, what we often see when people try to find an identity is that they focus on the self’s difference from others. There are indeed numerous opportunities for people to assert and display their difference, but we need to ask how meaningful this difference is?

This brings us to the question of the other. Proponents of commercial society identify happiness with prosperity, but its critics see it as a ‘joyless economy’. When we compare ourselves with others we often feel dissatisfied. We have failed to reach the goals they have reached. Instead of being able to assess their satisfaction in relation to a desired way of life, consumers are obsessed by relative wealth, happiness, and satisfaction – with keeping up with the Joneses. This is a quantitative calculation whose substantive content is immaterial – we must keep up with the Joneses whatever they happen to be buying or earning this month. It is also a case of ever shifting goal posts in which every level of satisfaction reached instantly turns into a new experience of dissatisfaction as one’s neighbours eventually catch up. (Lodziak)” This could become an extreme view. For Rousseau, as we have seen, emulation does not represent social solidarity but social tyranny and artificiality: The savage man lives within himself; social man lives always outside himself; he knows how to live only in the opinion of others, it is, so to speak from their judgement alone that he derives the sense of his own existence (Rousseau: *Discourse on Inequality*), Slater, 64). “? It is human association and specifically the comparison with others that brings about an awareness of inequality and thus a motive for competition. There is a social pressure to have, as opposed to enjoy, the pleasures of the earth. (?) The healthy, because limited and therefore satisfiable *amour soi*, is replaced by the unending pathology of *amour-propre*, desire for ‘consideration on the part of the others’. Needs are no longer anchored in nature but are linked to the approval and admiration of others, and therefore have no limit. Liberalism promised autonomy. (?) It actually delivers heteronomy — man’s needs are determined by the fashions, opinions and scrutiny of society? ” (Slater, 61). What we saw in Nussbaum’s

considerations of the Indian women was that sometimes it is important to dare to compare one self with others. Thereby the central question becomes which relation we should have towards the other so that the other make our own practical reason work better. “The idea of ‘the consumer’ conjoins the ideas of ‘freedom’ and ‘desire’. These terms were traditionally opposites. For example, in both classical philosophy and in neo-classical revivals during the eighteenth century (neo-Stoicism, civic humanism), desire makes slaves out of men because passion destroys reason. Moreover, national and civic freedom, like individual freedom, can only be guaranteed by the good government provided by men free from material want and freedom.

In the formation of responses to consumer culture, the themes of civic humanism and neo-stoicism were crucial. The argument here is about the relation between private and public virtues, echoing Aristotle’s distinction between *oikos* (the domestic economy) and the public virtues of the citizen: if the good life is a life ruled by reason rather than desire, the public good too depends on a clarity of mind derived from the restraint of desire (self-mastery)” (Slater, 65). These thoughts were also central to the work of Hegel.

9 Hegel

In this paper I will only briefly draw attention to two Hegelian insights, which I think better, would be able to form a standard of cultural criticism. First two comments on why this might be a good idea.

First, Hegel has often been read as conservative and not presenting any standard for cultural criticism. According to the conventionalist reading there is no external standpoint for Hegel to find a rational warrant for the customs of a culture and their embedded duties and virtues, but in a refreshing new reading Alan Patten answers that objection (Patten: *Hegel’s theory of freedom*). Patten differentiates his own ‘civic humanism and self-realisation reading’ from ‘the conventionalist reading’.

Moreover, Patten shows that Hegel, like Nussbaum, holds that “individuals achieve full self-actualisation to the extent that they develop and exercise their capacities for free and rational agency.” (Patten, 4). Thus Hegel, like Nussbaum, sets freedom at the centre of his political theory.

The two Hegelian insights concern what he calls 1) the objective side and 2) the subjective side of freedom.

(1) The first ‘Hegelian insight’ is that according to Hegel, our freedom depends on institutions which form us as social individuals. Therefore sustainable freedom is strongly dependent on certain institutions and life forms that both enable and form individual freedom. In other words, the striking feature of Hegel’s theory of freedom, in comparison with Nussbaum’s, is that it has ‘a particular content’. This is connected to Hegel’s thesis that an important aspect of freedom (called ‘objective freedom’) requires that the agent commits himself to certain determinate activities, relationships, and dispositions (Patten, 45). To Hegel the market place is a central institution where we are able to follow and satisfy our individual wants and interests. However, according to Hegel, even though it is necessary that the market place has its place, there ought to be other areas of social life where individual’s mere wants and gains are not so much at the centre.

(2) Another Hegelian insight is how our needs are historically shaped and formed through inter-subjective recognition. This has been wisely shown by Axel Honneth (in *The Struggle for Recognition*, 1995, and together with Nancy Fraser in *Redistribution or Recognition?*, 2003). Honneth argues with Hegel that the individual historically has come to need recognition of three different kinds in order to attain free self-realization. 1) In order confidently to feel able to express my own needs I need to take part in mutual processes of affective recognition. This happens in the relationship between mother and child, and later with friends and lovers. 2) A person also needs to feel respected as a person like everybody else in a more cognitive manner. Thus, in the market place, if people will trade with me, I am recognised as a person like everybody else, who knows the common rules of conduct. 3) Thirdly, we need recognition of our unique contribution to the common good. In Honneth’s later work this takes place in the working sphere. “For Hegel the problem of how an agent develops and reinforces a capacity for free and rational agency is primarily a problem of how he can arrive at and sustain the right sort of self-understanding.” “The possession of a certain set of goals, attitudes and capacities is an indispensable condition of subjectivity. These include: the capacity and willingness to distance oneself from one’s immediate desires and inclinations in order to subject them to critical examination; the awareness of having options and alternatives in one’s

life; and the self-discipline needed to tear oneself away from one's desires and inclinations in order to pursue one's own true or rational goals." Patten 124).

"Hegel's account of recognition seeks to explain how individuals could come to have, and to reinforce, this self-understanding or consciousness of their freedom. It is in the account of recognition that Hegel investigates the conditions under which agents can gain a sense of their own subjectivity or achieve what he calls self-certainty. (125)

The two insights are actually intimately connected. According to Patten, "The foundation of Hegel's attempt to show the necessity of certain practices and institutions is his theory of recognition. The theory of recognition provides the bridge between the concern for the development of individual freedom and the focus on the social institutions and practices that make up a community of free individuals" (Patten, 123).

"The crucial step in Hegel's argument that mutual recognition has specific institutional implications is his idea that mutual recognition needs to be mediated by institutions and practices." (Patten 130).

Taken together these Hegelian insights might give us a clue as how to understand the formation of capabilities in the culture of consumption. Moreover, "Hegel's (...) alternative (...) does offer an independent standpoint from which the legitimacy of major social institutions can be assessed. (...) Hegel's procedure leaves open the possibility that oppressive social orders can be condemned for failing to actualise the capacities for free and rational agency of their members" (ibid. 137).

When it comes to giving a diagnosis, and a therapy, Honneth's description of this Hegelian insight might help to solve the current problem of restless identity seeking in our culture. It explains how lack of identity makes us insecure and not able to choose our own life goals freedom, and gives us a normative standard which shows what we owe each other. It shows that trusting ones own needs is not something which is obvious, but depends upon a successful process of mutual recognition.

According to Rollo May (1972) lack of knowledge of our own real needs and wants and being insecure about whether to ask for what we really want might be the current situation under consumerism: "I cannot recall a time during the last four decades when there was so much talk about the individual's capacities and potentialities and so little actually confidence on the part of the individual about his power to make a dif-

ference psychologically and politically.”

It is easy to compare this with Nussbaum: By letting the Indian women compare themselves to other women in the west and by joining together in the SEWA NGO they were able to reach a critical stand on their own miserable situation and dared to dream of and struggle for a better life. However, when we think of the problems Nussbaum had with Crocker’s questions, and the quote from Nussbaum about how “states” ought to set the standard, we might want to test whether the Hegelian insight gives us a better normative standard to diagnose pathology. If we follow Daniel Miller in a chapter on Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* in *The Dialectics of Shopping* then using Hegel does make certain relevant questions come to light:

“How far does shopping suggest that objective conditions have created a potential home for humanity to be reconciled with, and how far does it establish the subjective perception that would enable people to reconcile themselves to that objectivity and indeed be at home with it? (...) Whether these institutions represent a state in which we would want people to be at home in” (183)

First of all, what Miller shows is that consumption could be the act of a free agent according to Hegel. Moreover, and also like Nussbaum (as when she considers the family as an institution, he believes that nevertheless have to test whether this is actually the case.

What does separate Nussbaum and Hegel is maybe that Nussbaum believes that gaining the capabilities will be enough, while Hegel believes freedom to have a particular content. He talks about how it is necessary to belong, and to feel at home in order to be free. In Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* §253 it says:

“If the individual is not a member of a legally recognized corporation, he is without the honour of belonging to an estate, his isolation reduces him to the selfish aspect of his trade, and his livelihood and satisfaction lack stability. He will accordingly try to gain recognition through the external manifestations of success in his trade, and these are without limit, because it is impossible for him to live in a way appropriate to his estate if his estate does not exist;” One of the problems with this argument is that to day people do not want to belong to a group if they feel that their authenticity is thereby questioned.

This opens up for a critical social diagnosis. If people are chasing money and fame they might be lacking “the honour of belong to an estate”. Furthermore, and this

is important if we want to see Hegelian thought as contemporary: It opens up for the question of whether the institutions we have and social games we play are “rational” and furthering our well being.

Nussbaum’s ‘individualism’ may not be combinable with a theory containing both her list of specific capabilities plus specific institutions (objective freedom) and specific structures of recognition (subjective freedom). Also the modern individual like Groucho Marx does not want to belong to any club that would have anyone like him as a member! However, if we are still sceptical of whether Hegel wants us to subject our desires to the values and customs of the Prussian State of his days — forgetting all about unique individuals — one ought to have a look on Hegel’s views on free agency. According to Hegel our desires is conditioned by my social environment and its expectations as well as my biological makeup. Therefore both our desires and social environment have to be scrutinized. He claims that there must be a reason for the agent to act as he does independent of his contingently given desires and inclinations and that he must be aware of this reason (Patten 64). We should not stop at what ‘is given’ “whether the latter is supported by the external positive authority of the state or of mutual agreement among human beings, or by the authority of inner feeling and the heart and by the testimony of the spirit which immediately concurs with this” (Patten, 65), PR preface 14/11).

10 Conclusion

I want to end my paper by concluding that considering the impact the market society has on our lives, the capabilities approach might need a ‘social’ supplement in order to present us with socially sustainable freedom. This is even more urgent due to Nussbaum’s later development. This supplement I suggest could be found in Hegel. If we — like Patten — read him as presenting a self-realisation view, we might be able to combine Nussbaum’s theory with some of his insights.
