COLLECTIVE SUBJECTIVITY AND
COLLECTIVE CAUSALITY

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the concepts of collective subjectivity and collective causality (as a property of social systems) as an alternative to methodological individualism, structuralism and functionalism. It resumes Aristotelian issues in a realist framework and applies, by way of example, its main concepts to criticize and suggest a distinct view of 'capabilities' and 'freedom' in connection with collective subjectivity.

1. Introduction

Social theory has often been polarized by nominalism and approaches which imply underlying stable structures that generate contingent effects in social life. The former has in general been connected to methodological individualist perspectives, whereas the latter has structuralism as its main frame. None of them is capable of dealing with what I have called collective subjectivities. Functionalist variants of social theory have also shown difficulty in coping with this sort of question. In particular the issue of causality ends up captured by the active and usually intentional behaviour of individuals – with possibly the unintended consequences of action it entails – and by structural causal effects social systems exercise upon their members. This is what brings functionalism directly into the same field of methodological individualism and structuralism, since it combines both approaches as to causality, although it is rather descriptive and does not actually suppose underlying structures nor, on the other hand, reduces everything to individual action, concentrating instead on the role of functions as propellers of individual

action. I have consistently criticized these standpoints in social theory and offered an alternative conception based on the aforementioned concept of collective subjectivity.[1]

In this article I shall first outline the fundamentals of this approach and then proceed to discuss a point in political philosophy with a double aim: to exemplify its utilization and, with its use, to briefly suggest a different view of the issues which that substantive theoretical point involves. Thus, so as to develop the concept of collective subjectivity, I shall introduce the concepts of *properties of social systems* as systems of interaction and of *collective movement and causality*, linking the latter to the notion of interaction too, as well as that of *levels of centring*. Amartya Sen's concept of freedom will then be taken up, criticized and an alternative to its discrete and individualistic character will be proposed as concluding the two steps development I intend to carry out in what follows. In so doing, I shall freely draw upon some of Aristotle's views of causality.

2. Properties and Collective Causality

Modern philosophy has had as one of its staples a view of causality which was forcefully articulated by Hume. Sensualist and empiricist, it states that what we deem as causal relations is merely an external association between consecutive phenomena. To this, through perception and due to habit, we then attribute causal links that cannot be actually verified (Hume, 1739-40: 10ff, 130ff). The so-called 'problem of induction' and related issues such as the thesis of the 'uniformity of nature' stem from this basic formulation, since generalizations could not be properly achieved otherwise: one fortuitous case would falsify what seemed to be universal features of nature (see Bhaskar, 1975). This is why Popper (1935), for instance, introduced deduction as the only proper means of scientific enquiry, although, or rather precisely because, he clung to Hume's definition of causality.

Another approach to causality, with very traditional roots, and an another way of seeing theory construction can be found, though. We will deal with the latter later on. The former harks back to Aristotle's view, although it has often been highly modified. Let us therefore start by resuming some of Aristotle's ideas about causality. Soon I will propose

some relevant changes to what has become the conventional manner of treating them in the social sciences.

In his *Physics* Aristotle defined cause as the 'why' of things, that upon which its 'coming into being' and 'passing away' rested. There were four types of cause: that from which a thing came out – its material cause; that which derived from its pre-existent 'essence', its universal 'form'; that which consists in the 'primary source' of change and maintenance; and that which implied the 'end' of a phenomenon, its finality (Aristotle, 1930: 194a and b). This view underwent far-reaching changes afterwards and modern thought in particular has rephrased its several aspects in terms of intentional behaviour (as for 'final' causality), direct triggers of movement as 'efficient causes', while the action of nature upon society stands for 'material causality' and 'formal' causes were transformed into the impact of society upon itself or its members, that is, as those causal processes that lend shape to social totalities, departing from previous processes (see Domingues, 2000a: 1-2).

When we speak of intentional action, however, unintended consequences have to be taken into account, as rather distinct strands of literature have steadily pointed out, whether those unintended consequences are foreseen by the actors or not. Moreover the intentionality of action cannot be taken in such a straightforward manner, according to the sort of issue that at least since the rise of psychoanalytical theory we have been aware of. Cognitive as well as normative and expressive elements are heavily influenced by underlying processes of which actors are rarely knowable. There came about in our understanding of action thus a *decentring of the subject*, which made action and actors much more complex entities. This internal decentring of the subject must be complemented by another one, which places actors within interactive situations where they are formed and in which their actions are readily enmeshed. These elements together allow therefore for a fuller understanding of action and of actors as processes, and in the case especially of interaction as the central element in the constitution and the fabric of social life, permit also a more dynamic view, which may discard the reification of social processes through concepts such as 'social fact' and the like. Indeed 'society' has a causal impact upon its members. That is, previous patterns of interaction and institutions, shared symbolic systems (although they are always idiosyncratically absorbed by actors), in short, shared memories are an important influence upon actors and

furnish patterns for their behaviour. But they are not straightjackets that determined action. We can speak of causality on the one hand as *active causality* when we refer to the transformed and very much broadened version of Aristotle's 'final causality'. In turn, that which was insinuated as a substitute for 'formal causality' might be termed *conditioning causality*, referring to the impact which interactive processes and shared memories exercise upon actors, decisively contributing to shape social life.

But we must not stop our analysis at this stage. In fact, although the decentring of the subject and the possibility of understanding social life beyond the reified notion of 'society' has been crucial to lead us beyond the traditionally modern concept of individual and society, which includes an exclusive polarization between them, a further element must be added to this picture, one that is, I believe, an even greater breakthrough in this regard. Thereby I want to introduce the concept of *collective subjectivity* and the accompanying one of *collective causality*. Before doing so let me note that active causality and conditioning causality do not at all lose importance in conceptual or explicative terms when that step is taken. They may be even paramount when some specific instances of social life are analyzed. But their features can in fact be better understood once we have a firm grasp of collective subjectivity and how they are related to this concept is more finely perceived.

Interaction is, as already stressed above, a decisive feature of social life. But interactions must not be confined to processes featuring individual actors. Collectivities interact too. This does not mean, however, that the action of individuals must be taken as the model after which we are to understand the movement of collective subjectivities. In fact too often the few sociologists – from Marx, with the concept of social class, to Parsons and the concept of 'collective actor', and a number of others who somehow or another draw upon their views – who are keen on this issue have provided views of collective subjectivity that are based on the model of intentionally and consciously behaving individual actors. They reproduce therefore the conjunction of consciousness and rational interested action which typically characterizes the view of individuals bequeathed to social thought by the Enlightenment (see Domingues, 1995). We must eschew that view and think of collective subjectivities as possessing different and varying *levels of (de)centring*. But in order that this makes any sense at all, we must return

to the issue of causality, otherwise we remain prone to the sort of either nominalist or reified view of collective subjectivities that is typical of most of social-theoretical standpoints. Thus, before further exploring the variation and characteristics of distinct levels of centring, we must tackle the problem of *collective causality*.

Social systems have frequently been seen as possessing properties of their own. Weber (1921-22: 1ff), for instance, rejected this perspective and embraced a strong nominalist view, of society as well as of action, which in the end were to be reduced to individual action and the individual attribution of meaning in terms of collective entities. He was correct in refusing the reification of social life that characterizes, for instance, Durkheim's (1893 and 1895) notion of 'social fact', but in my opinion he went too far in his reductive strategy. Hence we must move beyond both traditional standpoints. This is what Giddens (1979: 63-4; 1984: 16-24, 172ff) for one tried to do with his structuration theory and the notions of both the 'duality of structure' and 'properties'. However, while he pays no heed to interaction in the former, missing a crucial feature of social life and dynamic, he correctly eschews the reifying notion of 'emergent properties' just to lose his way when he suggests that 'structures' (and their 'properties', one can infer, although the point is not totally clear) are merely 'virtual'. I have discussed the point at some length elsewhere (Domingues, 1995: ch. 2) and will therefore not pursue it here. Instead let me offer an alternative perspective on that: the properties of social systems must be seen as being extant in the factual world; they are not 'emergent', though. They exist only in and through the interaction between individuals and social systems. In other words, they are features of processes, which cannot be reduced to the individuals or subsystems that comprise them nor are they more than what is realized in and through those processes. This has been more or less accepted with respect to the symbolic, hermeneutic, dimension of social systems, to their material dimension, to power relations, and so forth (Domingues, 1995: chs. 7-8).

Thus we must to a great extent resume important aspects of the sociological tradition, *viz-à-viz* causality as well as regarding general theories of the social system. However as to the definition of causality, in particular, but also with respect to some other crucial elements of the definition of social systems, I want to suggest some radical departures from conventional wisdom.

This happens, to begin with, because alongside active causality and conditioning causality, I propose to place collective causality. This is a property of social systems, which, likewise that of their symbolic dimension, cannot be either reduced to individuals or subsystems or be seen as more than the processes of which they are part and parcel. Collective causality answers, as a property of social systems, for their impact upon other systems, influencing them in a greater or lesser degree in the course of interactive processes. Collective causality is what triggers off *movement* – permanence and change – as the materialization of 'efficient cause' *viz-à-viz* collective subjectivities, beyond individual action. It is not only – though we cannot detach one from the other, except in analytical terms – the impact of individuals who belong to systems upon individuals belonging to other systems that must be accounted for. The specificity of collective causality must be borne in mind and not be reduced to individual actors and action. Surely in specific cases of analysis we may focus primarily on individual action and active causality or on collective subjectivities and collective causality – as well as on conditioning causality. This is not to be confused as a concrete reality, though, since they cannot be separated therein.

Let us now return to the problem of varying levels of centring in social systems *qua* collective subjectivities. They may sometimes resemble individual actors, and 'act' in a concerted way that might justify analogies in this regard, although surely the physical mobility of individual actors cannot usually be matched by larger social systems – or even perhaps smaller ones, except through the very and thus more disperse movement of the individuals who comprise them (although, for instance, a military ship in a battle looks very much like an individual in action). When action is concerted in this way, we can say that such social systems possess a high *level of centring*. But the opposite may be true. Some systems are very disperse in principle and are never able to achieve such a level of centring – they are more decentred, as in the case of women and men as collectivities, even on the global plane. Or else those systems with a very high potential level of centring may not necessarily or always achieve the actualization of their potential, especially in situations in which strife and division are widespread, for instance in the course of class struggles. I have argued elsewhere (Domingues, 1995: ch. 7 and Conclusion) that this uneven level of centring depends on two variables: identity and organization. The more identity and organization

a system has, the higher its level of centring; weak identity and organization lead, conversely, to a lower level of centring. These are, however, independent variables, which may vary therefore in opposite directions. Hence while identity may be strong, organization may be weak, although it is much more unlikely, except in abstract theoretical terms, that organization is strong when identity is low.

We must, however, not assume that a strong collective causal impact is related directly to a high level of centring. This may surely be the case. But it may happen that a low level of centring implies greater causal impact, contrary to what we are prone to believe due to our western understanding of action as based on activism and the purposive transformation of reality (see Parsons, 1959-60). We must not forget that the decentring of the subject is to be contemplated also in terms of the interactive fabric in which collective subjectivities are enmeshed. This entails that the causal impact of a collectivity hinges on its interactive partners and may thus be higher or lower depending on their susceptibility to the sort of change or permanence its 'movement' generates, on its direction and content. Collective causality as a property of social systems is a broad, multidimensional and interactively constructed social phenomenon.

This processual and interactive approach based on the notion of collective subjectivity with varied levels of centring allows us also to discard Lockwood's (1964) own nevertheless insightful (though he himself saw it as wholly 'artificial') distinction between 'social integration' and 'system integration', effected, respectively, by 'collective actors' and 'parts'. In addition to the fact that a rigorous functionalist approach tends to leave no room for causal relations, since it is merely how parts fit together that actually matters (see Parsons, 1965), if we think of social systems as systems of (inter)action and as possessing collective causality as a specific property, that distinction becomes absolutely superfluous and mistaken indeed. Not only are parts not a legitimate concept if we do not follow a functionalist receipt; also the means to understand collective phenomena should eschew the individual, highly centred model of actor that is supposed by Lockwood, although he, contrary to recent appropriations of his distinction (cf. Giddens, Habermas, etc.) correctly identified the need to introduce collective subjectivity at the core of sociological theory (see Domingues, 2000b).[2]

Overall and in a very general outline, social systems are here taken therefore as interactive processes with several dimensions, which can be separated out only analytically. They possess boundaries which are more or less clear-cut, since this is determined by the specific sort of interaction that is in focus – it cannot be taken a priori, as proponents of either open (Parsons, 1968) or closed systems (Luhmann, 1997) theories suppose they are. Instead of conceptual reification I make a plea for a more concrete analysis of social systems, while at the theoretical level a continuum of openness and closure (in fact delimitation regarding other systems) must be supposed. The same must be born in mind when we speak of their 'properties' – which can be described by 'structures' and 'models' designed for specific research purposes – in any of their dimensions – hermeneutic, material, of power, space-time: they may be more or less stable and defined. The same obtains too in what concerns levels of centring, which, as seen above, must not be reified either, since they span the whole gamut of possibilities in terms of concerted action, identity and organization.

3. Properties and Epistemology

How should we think of collective subjectivity and collective causality when we analyse social life? We could take a sensualist view of knowledge. In fact most proponents of this view have identified merely individuals as actors and at most structures as something such as 'social facts' to be accounted for. Against that, however, a realist (by no means in a Platonist, essencialist sense) but not empiricist point of view can be suggested. Thereby we take up an issue raised when I introduced Hume's view of causality in the previous section.

There is no reason to expect to find collective causality as if we just bumped into it as we might do with individuals out in the street. Specially in a highly individualist and individualistic culture collective phenomena appear only as the reified underside of social life, as that which constraints individuals and works above their heads, whether this is phrased in a critical vein (Weber), as a necessity for the maintenance of order (Durkheim, Parsons) or with a pretence of scientific neutrality (Luhmann). The active and varied features of collective phenomena tend to remain in the shade. Instead, the developments to be explored below

will be introduced so as to make clear that a theoretical strategy, beyond empiricism, individualism and reification must be pursued in order to allow for and make legitimate the conceptualisation of collective subjectivity. I shall tackle the several aspects of the problem in turn.

Someone more 'empirically' minded could object that this all sounds just like sheer nonsense, that this is not something that we can actually identify when we analyze social life. What we see are individuals acting and the constraints and enabling elements that condition their action. Hidden 'properties' are at best devices that help us in researches in which we are unable to describe and pinpoint processes and causal relations. In fact, although not so often so outspokenly, this mixture of nominalism and individualism – which are not the same thing, though they often appear entangled – is widespread especially in the social sciences. But then we must ask whether this position instead really makes sense. Against it, a second standpoint can be advanced. Let me start off with some questions. Can we grasp so directly processes in nature which are not dependent upon theoretical constructions that suppose collective entities with causal power which we cannot however directly perceive? We usually observe, frequently through their effects, entities which we have theoretically construed. We can of course maintain a nominalist and instrumental view of such entities. We can, nevertheless, uphold instead a realist perspective about them, even though it should be argued that reality and theory are not isomorphic, that is, that theory is always a construction that approximates more or less perfectly the deeper traits that structure reality. This is what Whitehead (1926) called 'analytical realism', against the atomistic view he identified in the heritage of the Enlightenment.

Apparently the first standpoint makes more sense and is intuitively sounder; in fact it is closer to (modern) common sense. The second view would require further justification and arguments in order to become plausible. This is merely a false *a priori* outlook, though. In concrete social science debates it does not obtain, however, except mainly in a rhetorical vein. Take for instance Elster's (1985: 8, 359ff) propositions about action. He is keen on the individualistic character of social life and, through his methodological individualism, demands that everything be 'reduced' to individual action. I think that a coherent individualistic methodology would be internally consistent only insofar as it rested on ontological individualism, otherwise there would no point in 'reducing'

everything to individual action or meaning – an issue Elster and others prefer usually to bypass. In any case, Elster himself recognizes that his strict methodological demand cannot be satisfied – at least, the optimistic proviso goes, for the moment, something that could and should be altered in the future. Moreover methodological individualists are prone to reintroduce via the back door the 'structural' elements that condition individual action, to which they loudly deny any legitimacy in their methodological manifestos. Once, however, we do not assume this harsh demand – which is *a priori* and quite arbitrary – the perspective of investigating social properties and collective entities that are responsible for 'movement' in social life naturally returns to centre stage and is immediately legitimated.

The strategy that argues in favour of the notion of 'emergent properties' is also flawed, though, and in fact the reasons for this are not in the end so different from those which beset methodological individualism. At bottom rock that strategy similarly banks on an atomistic, *quasi*-reductionist view of nature and society. This happens because only insofar as we suppose that reality is made up of elementary, disconnected and discrete parts or particles does the idea of 'emergence' make any sense. So as to 'emerge' things must develop from an underlying reality, just like previously existing atoms that combine via aggregation in classical, Newtonian physics – a perspective by the way already eschewed by later developments in physics – or as it occurs in the contractualist theories of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries – which implied an original state of nature in which individuals existed in independence from each other and before they actually came across each other out there in social life, a view now absolutely untenable. Once we take social and natural realities as *processes* in which individuals and collectivities are from the very start, in an *ontological* sense, entangled in interactive interplays, there is no point whatsoever in speaking of 'emergent properties'. Instead *properties*, *tout court*, take on centre stage, and collective causality features among them.[3]

In the human sciences the greatest discoveries of the last two centuries tend to imply hidden or at least hard to identify underlying processes. This is the case of Marx's (1867) theory of surplus value, as well as Freud's (1915a) concept of the 'unconscious', especially viz-à-viz the 'primary process' and related elements, such as the 'pleasure principle'. While class relations, which are central in the former's work,

were disguised by the market and the fetishism of the commodity, the latter was knowable only through its manifestations, viz., dreams, slips of the tongue and symptoms (compromises between desire and 'repression' [*Verdrängung*]) (Freud, 1915b). Only if we leave the immediate appearances of social life – which are in fact conditioned to a great extent by the cognitive frame of our 'imaginary' world, which is not as such natural or anything similar to that – and dive deeper into the fabric of the mind or of social reality can we actually grasp those two entities, which have properties of their own, without being misled by what are limitations of our cognitive apparatus, personal and social. This is where the beauty of Lévi-Strauss's (1955: 75ff) analogy of anthropology with geology lies too, when he points to the multiple layers of reality one can piecemeal make out through the socio-scientific study of reality, making reference also to Marxism and psychoanalysis, something that does not need necessarily to appear in tandem with his structuralist conceptions. This is also where I find the positive and productive kernel of Bhaskar's 'critical realism', which, underlying in some measure my arguments in previous sections of this paper, comprises in my view perhaps the most interesting contemporary approach to epistemology in the social sciences, despite his (not so clear) commitment to structuralism after all, *pace* on the other hand his neo-Aristotelian background. His shortcomings are related – similarly to Lévi-Strauss's – to a view of structure as a producer of effects, rather than grasping those deeper layers of reality as Marx and Freud did as for the social and the psychic spheres – that is, as processes whose shape and properties are not immediately accessible, but which must not be, in contradistinction, reified.

But why do not we easily reach those layers? How do we account for what Bachelard (1960) once called 'epistemological obstacles' to scientific knowledge? He was certainly right to point to the positions scientists hold fast due to the emotional investments they make on them at some point. This is especially true if we bear in mind that theories are, without exception, frames of meaning, contingent cultural-hermeneutic constructions rather than natural languages or systems of hypotheses (Giddens, 1976: 144ff). But I would like to single out three mechanisms which answer for obstacles in the development of knowledge, as obstacles to the penetration of ever deeper layers of reality.

The first derives from our general deficiencies – especially in terms

of what our senses can accomplish. This is what Marx (1894: 822) meant when he spoke – when referring to the trinitarian formula of capital, which hid the social classes: the bourgeoisie, landlords and workers – about the superfluity of science if the 'essence' of things immediately coincided with their 'appearance'. Observational technologies and theories are devices humanity has invented in order to go beyond that and thus be able to grasp, sensually and intellectually, the diverse worlds it inhabits. That is how, for instance, Marx (1867: 66) argues, in relation to the commodity, that 'abstraction' substitutes for microscopes and chemical reagents, themselves already devices that extent human powers of intervention upon nature. But it is also in this attempt to overcome our limits that we find a second problem: our theories, as well as our observational devices, are themselves limited too, and need therefore to be elaborated, something that does not necessarily implies breakthroughs capable of opening up aspects of individual characteristics, social life and the natural world to the extent we strive for. This does not, however, always come about. Finally, a third cognitive limitation is subtler and has not always been recognized. It refers to the blockages that stem from our own motivations. This is what was central to Marx's explanation of the invisibility of surplus value in capitalism, which derived from the limits to knowledge of such deep layers of reality such as produced through the ways of living and the interests of the ruling classes. This is also what Freud (1916: 48-9) meant when he pointed to both the 'resistance' to psychoanalysis and the deep, sexual reasons that underpin our behaviour: for him this very motivation prevented us from acknowledging itself. There are no neutral cognitive frames: they are socially structured and, together with normative and expressive aspects, conform particular forms through which only we have access to reality. This enables us to operate this access, to be sure, since humanity no longer knows, if it ever did as a species, natural cognition. But it possesses also its underside, since, being a construction, it brings in itself blockages, empty spots and impossibilities that are sometimes intractable.

It is frequently a combination of those three elements that creates difficulties for our understanding of social life. In the case of collective subjectivity and collective causality I think that they have all been indeed combined. Modern ideologies (from liberalism and natural rights theories in the eighteenth century through utilitarianism in the nineteenth to neoliberalism and rational choice perspectives in the twentieth) have

placed mainly individuals – as against especially classes – and (in second plane) reified societies or states as the sole elements of social life; although empirically this was plainly arguable, only theoretically can collective causality be observed. The slow corrosion of modern ideologies, notwithstanding the development of individualism and the emergence of neoliberalism, has however moved far enough for us to be able to discern a deeper layer of social reality which we can conceptualize as collective subjectivity.[4] This has been developing in social life by and large, as the rise of classes and unions, big corporations, corporatism and neocorporatism evinces. The same happens in social thought by and large, in which individualism, although by no means defeated, does not enjoy an absolute hegemony any longer (suffice it in this regard to check, for instance, the record of sociology in the twentieth century). Reductionist strategies, either implicit or explicit, cannot be taken for granted any longer and we can certainly devise new ways of theoretically framing the issue and challenging the epistemological strategy that atomist standpoints entail.

Finally, it must be made clear that the unearthing of such deeper layers should not imply a lessening of importance of more immediate layers, as for perception and/or as cognitive constructions – the market and consciousness in Marx's and Freud's examples, respectively. In fact the traditional vocabulary that speaks of 'essence' in opposition to 'appearance' may be very misleading, especially in Marx's case, since it is to the complex reality of social relations that he is pointing too (without a hint to a Platonic view of the world). We must therefore be attentive to the complexity of the world rather than putting forward a merely phenomenal relationship between 'appearances' and underlying, generative structures or even processes, since no simple distinction between effects and generative layers of reality is really tenable. For instance the market cannot be reduced to classes and their phenomenally disguised appearances in Marx nor can consciousness and the 'reality principle' be reduced to the unconscious and to the 'pleasure principle' in Freud. Similarly individuals cannot be reduced to collective subjectivity nor active (and conditioning) causality to collective causality (the same obtaining, as already noted, to other 'reductive' strategies). Otherwise we produce a metaphysical reification, to which structuralism is in particular prone, instead of a truly processual view of reality and of knowledge.

This has in any case an important methodological consequence, once we do not accept a one way relationship between deeper and more immediate layers of social reality – or any other reality for that matter. In fact part of the explanatory theories and hypotheses to be used in each level have some specificity and even autonomy, insofar as they cannot be 'reduced' to other levels. At times explanations will need to mobilize the full conceptual apparatus available to tackle an issue. Sometimes, in contradistinction, some discretion may be exercised by the researcher, who can then select concepts and explanatory hypotheses, which include causal relations and processes, in order to explain certain features of reality she has cut out to deal with aiming at specific objectives. Although this is not necessarily tantamount to theoretical pluralism within a single approach, there is nevertheless some warrant to operate with some degree of independence according to the specific targets of singular research goals.

4. Capabilities and Causality

One possible way to investigate how such conceptualizations can appear fruitfully, that is, generating new insights, may be the discussion of capabilities and freedom such as originally proposed by Amartya Sen. In fact, he claims to be crafting a neo-Aristotelian approach in terms of ethics. I shall not explore these ethical aspects here in any depth, except inasmuch as they directly relate to causality and properties. In any case, it is worth already pointing to a possible underlying connection with Aristotle which Sen himself does not seem to perceive or at least has refrained thus far from bringing out. It refers to the relationship between causality and agency in terms of capability. For it is the development of capabilities – in his case capabilities in an individual dimension alone, as we will see – that answers for the degree of causal impact an individual may exert upon society and upon him or herself. Sen stresses the connection of his approach to the *Nichomachean Ethics*, but I think that Aristotle's *Physics* offers a more general background for the problems he is keen to discuss in his approach. Nowhere is this clearer perhaps than in his attempt to clarify the role of 'agency'. He says that he does not utilize it in the narrow technical sense of the term in economics and game theory (namely, as 'principal-agent'), but rather in the 'older', 'grander'

sense, that is, as referring to

> ...someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives, whether or not we assess them in terms of some external criteria as well. (Sen, 1999: 18-9)

In fact a polemic with Sen, which surely has political implications, is instrumental for a discussion of collective subjectivity in more concrete terms insofar as it can help to show how and why taking this sort of issue into account may change our understanding of crucial problems in social life. Instead of individuals as bearers of social resources and targets of social policy, collectivities come to the fore and a new angle needs therefore to be chosen in the conceptualization of power and agency as well as in what concerns the strategies employed to tackle development and inequality.

Sen has proposed a view of development as the development of freedom – of individual freedom indeed, although there is always a great amount of imprecision when he relates capabilities to freedom. In *Inequality Reexamined*, for instance, Sen argues that 'capabilities' – that is, that we can do, are able to do – and 'achieved functionings' – that is, that which we can accomplish once we have those 'capabilities' – are clearly distinct. The evaluation of a person's well-being hinges on the value objects he can mobilize, therefore on his functionings and capabilities. In turn capabilities 'reflect' the person's freedom to lead one type of life or another, functionings, hence, he can achieve. Sen adds that 'actual freedom' is 'represented by the person's capability', which should be seen as 'representing freedom actually enjoyed' (Sen, 1992: 31ff). At many points, especially in *Development as Freedom*, Sen suggests, however, implicitly or explicitly, that freedom is synonymous to capability. But also he links freedom to functionings instead. Thus he says that

> [t]he concept of "functionings," which has distinctly Aristotelian roots, reflects the various things a person may value doing or being. (Sen, 1999: 75)

In the same book he offers what seems to me to be the more adequate and precise definition of capability in his approach, when he asserts that

[a] person's "capability" refers to the alternative combinations of
functioning that are feasible for her to achieve. Capability is thus a
kind of freedom: the substantive freedom to achieve alternative
functioning combinations (or, less formally put, the freedom to achieve
various lifestyles). (Sen, 1999: 74-5)

There is no doubt, at least I for one cannot see the issue any other
way, that capabilities, whether or not they may be equated to freedom,
relate directly to causal power. The problem with Sen's approach is that
he is adamant to confine causal powers to individuals. Sen is not entirely
oblivious to 'groups' – classes and similar collectivities. But he is clear
about the merely instrumental view this should imply. The analysis of
inequality must often be carried out, he argues, with regard to
'intergroups variations'. Nevertheless, groups *per se* are of no interest,
except as to what those variations might say about inequality 'among
individuals placed within groups' (Sen, 1992: 117). Had he any interest
on a discussion of causality – especially in terms of a realist, neo-
Aristotelian approach to which he seems to be implicitly close – he would
surely confine causality, and freedom, to those entities that can be
characterized as individuals. Collectivities are ruled out – cognitively and
normatively, i.e., ethically – in his approach. To put the issue in a
slightly different way and bring it closer to our former discussion, it can
be suggested that for Sen causality, and the 'freedoms' attached to it,
would be properties exclusively of individuals. Collectivities would be
seen as deprived of causality and of 'freedom' as well. This sits well
together in fact with his view of development. Although I cannot further
explore this here, it is noteworthy that global equity for him refers to
individuals and not to states. Nor has Sen any particular interest in
development as related to the overcoming of inequalities and relations of
domination between classes, nations, regions and so forth (Sen, 1999:
especially 3; 2001; 2002).

If we instead deal with collective subjectivities and recognize the role
of collective causality – as responsible for *agency*, that is, as yielding
movement – in social life as a property of social systems, a rather
different view of capabilities, freedom and development may come about.
General social relations of domination and inequality, power relations
indeed, which can explain why one collectivity has more impact upon
social life than other and the ethical necessity of thinking development as

changes in this respect might be then at stake. To be sure, collective capabilities may not have the immediacy in terms of perception that individual capabilities appear to enjoy, although I tend to think that there is nothing obvious at all – contrary to Sen's somewhat naive, if not for being philosophically and politically informed, standpoint – in identifying and concentrating on individual capabilities. Only insofar as a philosophically atomistic (and nominalist) and politically liberal point of view is taken for granted can such ideas be upheld in such a simple and straightforward manner. But the opposite strategy seems to me more legitimate in fact than the one Sen, among others, espouses. We must from the very start analyze individuals and collectivities as interwoven – the same happening with their causalities and freedoms, irrespective, by the way, of their specific levels of centring. Only the neo-liberal intellectual climate of last decades – which has *utilitarian individualism* as its main piece of wisdom – can explain why development as freedom can be so oblivious to collectivities in their multiple dimensions. Even Sen's (1992: ix-xi, 1, 20) correct (and non-Aristotelian) awareness of social pluralism in modernity would benefit from this insight, since it is to collectivities as axes of ways of life, regardless of individual pluralism too, that we often have to refer. Once again it is the intertwinement of individuals and collectivities – and how they impact causality upon one another – that comes up in the discussion.

Although I cannot expand on that here, let me stress that this should be the theoretical underpin of an approach that, taking up Sen's insight into 'capabilities', but underscoring the role of domination and inequalities between collectivities, resumes former theories of development and places countries and nations, regions and ethnic groups, classes, genders and races at the core of the debate and of programmatic proposals (see Domingues, 2003). Otherwise, now in a more substantive realm, we remain captive of the traditionally modern, in this case (neo)liberal, exclusive concern with individuals and 'societies' – which do not even feature in Sen's approach and should, in any case, have their collective causality acknowledged.

5. Conclusion

This article has argued in favour of a concept of collective subjectivity

qua systems of action, which possess specific properties, among which collective causality. Having criticized methodological individualism, structuralism and functionalism, as well as eschewing the distinction between social and system integration, it has simultaneously developed the concept collective subjectivity, especially in relation to the notion of varying levels of centring of social systems. The epistemological intricacies related to such issues were then discussed and a realist, but anti-reification conception upheld. Finally, Sen's view of 'capabilities' was criticized and its valid ideas were taken to a collective dimension. Many other more empirically oriented issues could be taken up drawing upon collective subjectivity in order to generate new insights and alternative standpoints.

The theory of collective subjectivity, such as sketched above and developed in other occasions, is not proposed as an exclusive approach to the social sciences, especially to sociological theory. Pluralism has finally and correctly been accepted as a feature of these disciplines, although I would like to maintain that consistency should be aimed at within the frame of singular bodies of theory. I think that, in any case, and especially as to causality and agency, the theory proposed above offers some very new and distinct ideas, which may be a good energizer for the faltering sociological scene of the beginning of the millennium.

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NOTES

1. This was done especially in Domingues, 1995 and 2000a.

2. Archer's (1995, 1996) traditional and highly centred view of collective actors as well as her 'analytical dualism' (which is prone to the sort of truism as to 'emergence' that will be discussed below) do not seem to me to be at all a proper alternative to such stalemates, although she is at least aware of the problem.

3. Here it is worth noting that historically, that is, with respect to their generation, properties may indeed 'emerge' from previous social processes. That much is obvious. Taken too far and pretending an outstanding theoretical position, this is merely a pompous truism, though. *Ontologically*, that is, as to the constitution of social (and natural) entities, or their 'being', this does not apply and 'emergence' is a mistaken notion. See, for

a detailed argument in this direction, Domingues, 2000b.

4. I shall not, however, expound here on a view of the epistemological strategies which I deem necessary for an optimal development of the social sciences. For the dialectical strategy I suggest, see Domingues, 2000a, ch. 2.

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