

This is a repository copy of *Capability, Objectivity and 'False Consciousness': On Sen, Marx and J.S. Mill.*

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/109972/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Article:**

Qizilbash, Mozaffar Ali Khan orcid.org/0000-0002-2654-591X (2016) *Capability, Objectivity and 'False Consciousness': On Sen, Marx and J.S. Mill.* International Journal of Social Economics. pp. 1207-1218. ISSN: 0306-8293

<https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSE-04-2016-0127>

---

**Reuse**

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

**Capability, Objectivity and 'False Consciousness': On Sen,  
Marx and J.S. Mill**

|                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| Journal:         | <i>International Journal of Social Economics</i>                                    |
| Manuscript ID    | IJSE-04-2016-0127   |
| Manuscript Type: | Research Paper  |
| Keywords:        | Welfare, Well being, Human Capabilities, Human development, Marxism, Social justice |
|                  |   |

## Capability, Objectivity and 'False Consciousness': On Sen, Marx and J.S. Mill

### Abstract

The extent to which Amartya Sen's capability approach is prefigured in Karl Marx's views comes into sharper focus when one notes that Marx and Friedrich Engels explicitly argued that the transformation from capitalism to communism would involve the development of 'a totality of capacities'. Sen also cites the notion of 'false consciousness' in developing his view of objectivity and claims a Marxian pedigree for the notion of 'objective illusion'. He suggests that public discussion can make evaluative judgements better informed and less parochial, so that they connect more closely with what people have reason to value. I argue that this line of argument is also closely related to views John Stuart Mill advanced in his discussion of the 'competent judges' and in his defence of liberty of thought and discussion.

### 0. Introduction

There are several citations from Karl Marx's works scattered across Amartya Sen's writings. In this paper I am chiefly concerned with citations of Marx's work in the contexts of Sen's work on capability and 'development' understood as 'capability expansion' as opposed to an expansion of income or wealth or of 'utility' as it is sometimes defined, and on objectivity, where Sen cites the notion of 'false consciousness' in his discussion of 'objective illusion'. The relevant citations from Marx in the context of the capability approach are usually from Marx's earlier writings, some of which were co-authored with Friedrich Engels. While these citations are well-known and recognised, reading Marx and Engels' texts more closely suggests a deeper relationship between some of Sen's views and Marx's writings than has been recognised, no doubt in part because of a relative lack of interest in Marx's work amongst some of Sen's readers. In particular, some of Sen's criticisms of certain forms of utilitarianism are clearly connected to Marx's work and the notion of 'false consciousness',

1  
2  
3 though I suggest that Marx and Sen invoke this notion in different ways in their criticisms of  
4 utilitarianism. I argue that even if there is a significant connection between Marx's and Sen's  
5 criticisms of utilitarianism – since they both implicitly invoke the notion of 'false  
6 consciousness' - the position that Sen defends in his most recent works, which echoes some  
7 of Marx's texts, in fact also has a close affinity with some views within the utilitarian  
8 tradition which are found in John Stuart Mill's works and is not as far from that tradition as  
9 one might initially think from a casual reading of Sen's works.  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18

19 I should mention at the outset that Sen has openly and explicitly acknowledged the  
20 influence of Marx, alongside others, on his work. In a symposium on his and J.S. Mill's  
21 works Sen writes that he takes 'much pride ... in the fact that my ideas are not "rootless" –  
22 they are in a "tradition" established by some very great people' (Sen, 2006, p. 81), Sen goes  
23 on to list some of his 'intellectual instigators' – and for the relevant symposium he lists:  
24 Aristotle, Adam Smith, Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx and Kenneth  
25 Arrow. In listing these intellectual debts, Sen notes something important that each thinker has  
26 taught him, and in Marx's case he acknowledges his debt to him: 'notably for teaching us that  
27 the most terrible inequalities may be hidden behind an illusion of normality and justice' (Sen,  
28 2006a, p. 81). This specific point relates to the themes of 'false consciousness' and 'objective  
29 illusion' which I take up in section 2. I start in section 1, with Sen's work on capability and  
30 development. Section 3 connects Sen's views on 'objectivity' with J.S. Mill's discussions;  
31 and section 4 concludes.  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48

49 Before discussing the various passages from the works of Sen, Marx and J.S. Mill, I  
50 should add that my aim here is not to provide a close historical reading of the works of Marx  
51 and Mill, but only to make a start by exploring specific claims Sen makes which are  
52 prefigured in the works of Marx and Mill. Furthermore, even if Sen himself explicitly  
53 acknowledges the influence of Marx as one of his 'intellectual instigators' and claims a  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

pedigree for some of his ideas in Marx's views, I do not wish to make any strong claim about the explicit influence of either Marx or Mill – beyond any debt Sen himself acknowledges - on the development of Sen's own ideas.

### 1. Development as Capability Expansion.

In advancing the capability approach Sen cites a passage from Marx and Engels' *The German Ideology* (written in 1845-46; see Marx and Engels, 1970, p. 1). In explaining and motivating the notion of capability he writes that:

[c]apability reflects a person's freedom to choose between different ways of living. The underlying motivation – the focussing on freedom – is well captured by Marx's claim that what we need is 'replacing the domination of circumstances and chance over individuals by the domination of individuals over chance and circumstances' (Sen, 1990, p. 44).

In these works one of Sen's central claims is that development can be seen as a 'capability expansion', and because capability reflects a person's freedom, it is an expansion of freedom. And in making that claim Sen distinguishes his view from some 'traditional' views in economics according to which development is understood as an expansion of income or material wealth or in terms of an expansion of 'utility'. Here again Sen cites Marx. One reason for this is that Sen argues that commodities, income and resources are not valuable in themselves. Rather they are ultimately valuable because of what people are able to do with these, the various valuable 'beings' and 'doings' which constitute valued 'functionings' they can achieve, and the range of lives which are constituted by these functionings from which they can choose one – which he calls 'capability' (see, for example, Sen, 1993b, p. 31). Marx's concern in these later works - notably in the *Grundrisse* which was written in 1857-58 and in *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* which was published in 1867 - that under capitalism people may come to value commodities independently of their uses to people (see

1  
2  
3 Marx, 1977a, p. 436 and 1990, p. 176) – so-called ‘commodity fetishism’ – focusses on much  
4  
5 the same concern. As he puts this: ‘[i]f commodities could speak, they would say this: our  
6  
7 use value may interest men, but it does not belong to us as objects. What does belong to us as  
8  
9 objects, however, is our value....We relate to each other merely as exchange values’ (Marx,  
10  
11 1990, pp. 176-7). Or to take another definition of the concept, G.A. Cohen (2000, p. 199) tells  
12  
13 us that ‘commodity fetishism is the appearance that products have value in and of themselves,  
14  
15 apart from the labour bestowed on them’.  
16  
17

18  
19 The central concern with human beings, which pervades Marx’s early writings is also  
20  
21 a theme in modern work on capability, and indeed other approaches which argue for ‘people  
22  
23 centred development’ or ‘human development’ (see Haq, 1995). And so, the following  
24  
25 passage from Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* from 1844 is also regularly  
26  
27 cited as a precursor to the capability approach and the human development paradigm by Sen  
28  
29 and others:  
30  
31

32  
33 It will be seen how in the place of the wealth and poverty of political economy come  
34  
35 the rich human being and the rich human need. The rich human being is  
36  
37 simultaneously the human being in need of a totality of human life-activities – the  
38  
39 man in whom his own realisation exists as an inner necessity, as need. (Sen, 1990, 43  
40  
41 citing Marx, 1977b; see also Marx, 1963, p. 164 and 1977a, p. 94 for alternative  
42  
43 translations of this text).  
44  
45  
46

47  
48 In this and other texts I suggest that the ‘humanism’ of the early Marx is to some extent  
49  
50 echoed in Sen’s ideas. Both are concerned that development should free human beings from  
51  
52 the shackles that restrict them and allow them, or give them opportunity to, flourish. And  
53  
54 these citations from Marx - in relation to the view of development as an expansion of  
55  
56 capability - are not peripheral to Marx’s writings, since Marx himself used concepts such as  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 'capacity' in his own writings. In describing why under communism 'individuals must  
4 appropriate the existing totality of productive forces' in *The German Ideology* Marx and  
5 Engels tell us that:  
6  
7  
8  
9

10 The appropriation of these forces is itself nothing more than the development of the  
11 individual capacities corresponding to the material instruments of production. The  
12 appropriation of a totality of instruments of production is, for this reason, the  
13 development of a totality of capacities in the individuals themselves (Marx and  
14 Engels, 1965, p. 85).  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21

22 To this degree, clearly Marx and Engels' view was a close relative of Sen's approach and, on  
23 that view, in the move from capitalism to communism individuals will develop a 'totality of  
24 capacities'. Indeed, it is precisely in relation to the 'free development of individuals in  
25 communist society' that Marx and Engels suggest that because '[i]n the present epoch, the  
26 domination of material conditions over individuals, and the suppression of individuality by  
27 chance, has assumed its sharpest and most universal form' it has set them the 'task of  
28 replacing the domination of circumstances and chance over individuals by the domination of  
29 individuals over chance and circumstances' (Marx, 1970, p. 117). Indeed once one reads the  
30 text which Sen cites in the context it originally appeared, it becomes very clear how and why  
31 Marx and Engels's vision of a transition from capitalism to communism strongly echoes the  
32 view of development as an expansion of capability.  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47

## 48 **2. The Critique of Utilitarianism, Objectivity and 'False Consciousness'.**

49

50 Sen and Marx are also both critics of utilitarianism. The capability perspective is motivated  
51 not merely by a desire to avoid an inappropriate focus on commodities or resources as  
52 valuable in themselves, but also a concern with some views of welfare which are dominant in  
53 the utilitarian tradition and which have had a significant influence on the development of  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 welfare economics. The views of welfare that Sen has in mind are, in broad terms, views  
4  
5 which take welfare or 'utility' to be constituted by either desire satisfaction, pleasure or  
6  
7 happiness. Sen's argument is that if people who find themselves in straitened conditions  
8  
9 restrict or adapt their desires to the limits of what is possible in their circumstances or learn to  
10  
11 find pleasure or happiness in small mercies, then their welfare may not be accurately  
12  
13 reflected by relevant 'utility'-based currencies. This is the so-called 'adaptation' or 'small  
14  
15 mercies' argument and it is one of many levels at which Sen criticises utilitarian views, and I  
16  
17 leave other aspects of his critique to one side in this paper.  
18  
19

20  
21 Martha Nussbaum (1988, pp. 153-4) argued in her first discussion of capability, that there  
22  
23 were common elements in Sen's and Aristotle's views. However, Nussbaum also claimed  
24  
25 that Sen did not go far enough in responding to utilitarian views by merely shifting focus  
26  
27 from the currency of 'utility' to that of 'capability'. In particular, Nussbaum claimed that Sen  
28  
29 needed to go further and to develop a more objective view which might list the contents of a  
30  
31 good life. Nussbaum developed her own views by articulating a list of valuable capabilities,  
32  
33 first in the context of what she termed 'Aristotelian Social Democracy' (see Nussbaum, 1990  
34  
35 and 1992 *inter alia*) and then in her more recent works which develop a form of political  
36  
37 liberalism (Nussbaum, 2000, 2006 and 2011 *inter alia*). But the crucial worry about Sen's  
38  
39 view is well expressed in her earliest discussion where she writes:  
40  
41  
42  
43

44  
45 Suppose we observe, as Sen has, that females in certain poor regions in India suffer from  
46  
47 diseases of malnutrition in greater numbers than males do, and thus are less capable of  
48  
49 various functionings requiring mobility and vigor... This pattern is the result of  
50  
51 traditional distributional inequities, bolstered by culturally learnt values. Let us say that,  
52  
53 when questioned, these women not only say that they feel good and are doing well. (This,  
54  
55 we recall is what in fact they do say.) ... Sen takes their case to show the deficiencies of  
56  
57 approaches to distribution that are based upon desire and satisfaction; well and good. But  
58  
59  
60



1  
2  
3 it seems to me that the capability approach will exhibit similar deficiencies, unless we can  
4 specify an objective evaluation procedure that will have the power to criticise the  
5 evaluation of functionings that has been hedged around with discrimination and inequity.  
6  
7 Sen seems on the whole to think that we remove the problem by moving from the  
8 utilitarian emphasis on desire to his own approach's emphasis on the *valuation* of  
9 capabilities. But the valuation procedure that is involved in capability selection seems to  
10 me, at least without further description, to be no more incorruptible than desire itself is.  
11 Just as people can be taught not to want or miss the things that their culture has taught  
12 them they should not or could not have, so they too can be taught not to value certain  
13 functionings as constituents of their good living, where their culture has an interest in, or  
14 cannot avoid, denying them access to these functionings (Nussbaum, 1988, pp. 175-6).  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27

28 And she later adds:  
29  
30

31 It seems to me, then, that Sen needs to be more radical than he has been so far in his  
32 criticism of utilitarian accounts of well-being, by introducing an objective normative  
33 account of human functioning and by describing a procedure of objective evaluation  
34 by which functionings can be assessed through their contribution to the good human  
35 life. I think that Aristotle will provide substantial assistance in this task. (Nussbaum,  
36 1988, p. 176).  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44

45 I will not discuss in any comprehensive way the various responses Sen's work can offer to  
46 Nussbaum's objection in this text. Nor shall I dwell at length on the details of Sen's own  
47 discussion of some of the points Nussbaum raises in this discussion. I need nonetheless to  
48 connect Sen's responses to the discussion, and the claims I make, in this paper. One response  
49 Sen makes to this line of argument is that an 'objective normative account' is one 'route' one  
50 might follow in filling out the capability approach (Sen, 1993b, p. 47). He adds that he also  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 has an ‘inclination to argue about the nature and importance of the kind of objectivity implied  
4  
5 in this [Aristotelian] approach’. He suggests that his chief reason for not committing to an  
6  
7 Aristotelian view of the good is that ‘the deliberate incompleteness of the capability approach  
8  
9 permits other routes to be taken’ (Sen, 1993b, p. 47). In this paper, my focus is on Sen’s own  
10  
11 views of objectivity which is only one of the issues he mentions (but does not pursue) in his  
12  
13 initial response to Nussbaum. These views were developed most fully in his paper ‘Positional  
14  
15 Objectivity’ (Sen, 1993a) which was published around the time of his response to Nussbaum  
16  
17 and indeed informs his later discussions of the reliability and robustness of evaluations of  
18  
19 functionings in applications of the capability approach in contexts of the sort Nussbaum has  
20  
21 in mind in this text.  
22  
23  
24  
25

26 In ‘Positional Objectivity’ Sen notes that when placed in the same position different  
27  
28 people may come to the same belief, say about the height of a mountain or the size of the  
29  
30 moon. To this degree, the belief may be ‘objective’ inasmuch as objectivity may require  
31  
32 ‘interpersonal invariance when the observation position is fixed’ (Sen, 2002, p. 466). In this  
33  
34 sense, it may be ‘positionally objective’. But the belief may, nonetheless, be false because of  
35  
36 the limitations of the position from which the observer is viewing the mountain or moon.  
37  
38 Since such a false belief is nonetheless ‘objective’, Sen refers to it as an ‘objective illusion’.  
39  
40 He writes that ‘[t]he notion of “objective illusion,” used in Marxian philosophy, can be  
41  
42 helpfully interpreted in terms of positional objectivity’ and adds that ‘the concept of objective  
43  
44 illusion figures in Marx’s economic writings’ as well (Sen, 2002, p. 470). The main text he  
45  
46 cites in support of this claim is from G.A. Cohen (Sen, 2002, p. 470 and Cohen, 2000, pp.  
47  
48 398-9) and it relates to the ‘outer form of things, which enjoys an objective status’:  
49  
50  
51  
52

53 For Marx the senses mislead us with respect to the constitution of the air and the  
54  
55 movements of heavenly bodies. Yet a person who managed through breathing to detect  
56  
57 different components of the air would have a nose that did not function as healthy human  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 noses do. And a person who sincerely claimed to perceive a stationary sun and a rotating  
4  
5 earth would be suffering from some disorder of vision, or motor control. Perceiving the  
6  
7 air as elementary and the sun as in motion are experiences more akin to seeing mirages  
8  
9 than to having hallucinations. For if a man does not see a mirage under the appropriate  
10  
11 conditions, there is some wrong with his vision. His eyes have failed to register the play  
12  
13 of light in the distance.  
14  
15

16  
17 Sen notes that here ‘the observations, which are taken to be objective, relate to the positional  
18  
19 features of breathing the air with a normal nose, seeing the sun with normal eyes, observing  
20  
21 the play of light in the distance with normal vision, and so on’ (Sen, 2002, 471).  
22  
23

24  
25 Sen thinks that ‘Marx’s own use of the idea’ of objective illusion ‘was primarily in the  
26  
27 contexts of class analysis and “commodity fetishism,” and it led to his investigation of what  
28  
29 he called “false consciousness”’ (Sen, 2002, p. 471). It is not actually clear that Marx himself  
30  
31 used the term ‘false consciousness’ – since the origins of the actual term are usually traced to  
32  
33 a letter Friedrich Engels wrote to Franz Mehring on 14 July 1893 (which was after Marx’s  
34  
35 death) - and it is worth checking what Engels had in mind in this letter. Engels writes in that  
36  
37 letter that ‘[i]deology is a process accomplished by the so-called social thinker consciously, it  
38  
39 is true, but with a false consciousness. The real motives impelling him remain unknown to  
40  
41 him’ (Marx, 1978, p. 766). This remark of Engels’ does, nonetheless, refer back to his own  
42  
43 earlier co-authored writings with Marx and their discussions of ideology in particular. As  
44  
45 they put it in *The German Ideology*: ‘[t]he class which has the means of material production  
46  
47 at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that  
48  
49 thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of production are subject  
50  
51 to it’ (Marx, 1977, 176). By implication, the ideas of Engels’ ‘social thinkers’ reflect the class  
52  
53 structure of their time, even if they are not aware of it.  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 As regards Sen, the precise notion he often has in mind when he discusses ‘false  
4 consciousness’ relates to various ways in which injustices persist because of a tendency of  
5  
6  
7 ‘making allies out of the deprived’ (Sen, 2002, p. 474). This relates to the other element in  
8  
9  
10 Marx and Engels’ text: ‘the ideas of those who lack the means of production are subject to it’  
11  
12 and they are liable, thus, not to question the status quo. The dominance of the ruling class  
13  
14 means – as Anthony Giddens (1971, p. 41) expresses this point – that ‘the dominant class  
15  
16 develops or takes over ideological forms which legitimise its domination’. To the degree that  
17  
18 they accept these forms, those who lack the means of production do not question the  
19  
20 legitimacy of class domination.  
21  
22

23  
24 Sen illustrates the idea of ‘objective illusion’ in a variety of ways and the examples he  
25  
26 cites are related to those Nussbaum mentions when she urges Sen to specify a more  
27  
28 ‘objective evaluation procedure’. One involves the perceived levels of morbidity in different  
29  
30 parts of, or provinces in, India. One finding Sen reports is that because people in Kerala have  
31  
32 a higher level of knowledge or consciousness of various illnesses because the level of literacy  
33  
34 and education is higher than it is in some other parts of India, such as Uttar Pradesh, they may  
35  
36 report a higher perceived level of morbidity than people in the latter province. The higher  
37  
38 perceived level of morbidity in Kerala runs counter to other measures of health and, for Sen,  
39  
40 it would be an objective illusion to conclude that people in Kerala are, on average, less  
41  
42 healthy than they are in Uttar Pradesh (Sen, 2002, p. 472). Sen reports similar results about  
43  
44 gender-bias in cases where women’s self-reported level of morbidity is, on average, lower  
45  
46 than that of men in some parts of the world (Sen, 2002, p. 473). Objective illusions of this  
47  
48 sort might, Sen thinks, be defused if people are able to take different positions and undertake,  
49  
50 what he calls, a ‘trans-positional assessment’, which involves ‘drawing on but going beyond  
51  
52 different positional observations’ so that ‘trans-positional scrutiny would also demand some  
53  
54 kind of coherence between different positional views’ (Sen, 2002, p. 467). Such scrutiny  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 would, for example, allow one to escape the ‘illusion’ that people are (on average) healthier  
4 in Uttar Pradesh than they are in Kerala. Indeed, in his later work, he suggests that ‘[t]he  
5 positional objectivity of these parochially mistaken diagnoses commands attention, and social  
6 scientists can hardly dismiss them as subjective or capricious. But nor can self-perceptions be  
7 taken to be accurate reflections of health and illness in an appropriate transpositional  
8 understanding’ (Sen, 2009, p. 165).  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15

16  
17 What is the connection between ‘objective illusion’ as Sen understands it and ‘false  
18 consciousness’? Clearly, if people in Uttar Pradesh are on average comparatively unhealthy  
19 and have limited education, and report that they have low levels of morbidity because they  
20 have limited knowledge of medicine, data based on their reports would suggest that there is  
21 no significant disadvantage from which they suffer. That would give the appearance of  
22 ‘normality’ to their condition, when they actually suffer from significant deprivation. The  
23 same can be said about cases of adaptation of desires and where people learn to find pleasure  
24 or happiness in small mercies. If people have adapted to their situation by cutting back their  
25 desires, or finding pleasure in small mercies, with a view to coping with their living  
26 conditions, a desire, pleasure or happiness calculus might also significantly underestimate  
27 their disadvantage. While each of these various cases is distinct, in each, the deprived would  
28 provide information or express views which would obscure and significantly understate their  
29 own suffering or deprivation. They would thus become complicit in the perpetuation and  
30 legitimization of an unjust status quo.  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48

49 While Sen makes the notion of ‘making allies of’ the poor or deprived central in his  
50 discussions of ‘false consciousness’ and objective illusion, Marx and Engels’s own  
51 discussion of utilitarianism criticises it in a different way which implicitly also invokes ‘false  
52 consciousness’. As we have seen, Marx and Engels thought that production of ideas reflects  
53 the material conditions of life. This line of thinking underlies their criticism of utilitarianism.  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 They suggest in *The German Ideology* that '[t]he advances made by the theory of utility and  
4 exploitation, in various phases, are closely connected with the various periods of  
5 development of the bourgeoisie' (Marx and Engels, 1970, p. 111). They go on in assessing  
6 the criticisms of existing social and economic arrangements which 'Bentham and his school'  
7 advanced and suggest that: '[t]hereby the whole criticism of the existing world provided by  
8 utilitarianism moved within a narrow compass. Prejudiced in favour of the conditions of the  
9 bourgeoisie, it could criticise only those relations which had been handed down from a past  
10 epoch and were an obstacle to the development of the bourgeoisie' (Marx and Engels, 1970,  
11 p. 113).

12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24 If utilitarians suffer from objective illusion or 'false consciousness' here this must derive  
25 from their position in society. This criticism of utilitarianism is quite different to the one  
26 which Sen advances in articulating the capability approach since it is primarily concerned  
27 with the production of ideas rather than the ways in which the disadvantaged themselves  
28 obscure the injustices of the status quo. Marx and Engels' view that ideology masks the  
29 material conditions of life is also famously developed by Georg Lukács in his discussion of  
30 'false consciousness' in the context of the 'problem of crises' (in capitalism). Lukács argues  
31 that even if 'a scientifically acceptable solution [to the problem of crises] does exist' that  
32 does not help since 'to accept it would be tantamount to observing society *from a standpoint*  
33 *other than that of the bourgeoisie*' (Lukács, 1995, p. 229). This discussion of 'false  
34 consciousness' seems to invoke what Sen calls 'objective illusion': there may be truths that  
35 bourgeois thinkers have no access to simply because of their 'position' within society as  
36 members of the bourgeoisie. Marx and Engels are making a similar point about 'Bentham and  
37 his school'. For this reason, they suggest that utilitarians can provide no more than 'a mere  
38 apologia for the existing state of affairs' (see Marx and Engels, 1970, p. 114). This way of  
39 invoking 'false consciousness' in criticising utilitarianism – which involves bourgeois  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 thinkers providing an apologia for capitalism - is quite different from the line that Sen takes,  
4  
5 which focusses on the various ways in which the deprived can adapt to their living  
6  
7 conditions, or perceive them in such a way as to obscure the nature of inequalities or  
8  
9 deprivation in society.<sup>1</sup>  
10

### 11 12 13 **3. Objectivity, Public Discussion and Informed Desire.** 14

15  
16 Given Sen's account of 'objective illusion' one might naturally ask: how might one defuse  
17  
18 'objective illusions' in moral and political thought? And how might one make more reliable  
19  
20 judgements in assessing people's desires, valuations and reasons when people may adapt to  
21  
22 their situations? One theme that runs through Sen's work is that public reasoning which  
23  
24 involves discussion and interaction with others, including distant others, can broaden one's  
25  
26 perspective and so may avoid objective illusion through trans-positional scrutiny. For this  
27  
28 sort of reason Sen also associates objectivity in ethics with the ability to stand up to, and  
29  
30 survive scrutiny through, public reasoning (see Sen, 2009, p. 122), and this is a view of  
31  
32 objectivity he more generally attributes to John Rawls (see Sen, 2009, p. 42). Indeed, when  
33  
34 he is faced with those who follow Nussbaum's critique in suggesting that his version of the  
35  
36 capability view does not go far enough in advancing an objective view of the good, his  
37  
38 implicit response in later statements of the capability approach (see, for example, Sen, 2009,  
39  
40 p. 231) is to argue that the functionings which are relevant in applying the capability  
41  
42 approach are ones one not merely values but also has reason to value. Potential divergences  
43  
44 between what one values and has reason to value can emerge if one is ill-informed or if one's  
45  
46 perspective has been narrowed by the parochial or limited conditions in which one finds  
47  
48 oneself (see, for example, Sen, 2006b, p. 237 and Qizilbash, 2007, p. 183). And in both cases  
49  
50 engagement in public reasoning, not merely with others in one's own nation, but also  
51  
52 potentially including the views of distant others, can narrow the gap between what one values  
53  
54 and has reason to value. As Sen notes when discussing evaluative reflection:  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 This is an exercise in which we are constantly engaged. To that general understanding has  
4  
5 to be added the possible importance of public reasoning as a way of extending the reach  
6  
7 and reliability of valuations and of making them more robust. The necessity of scrutiny  
8  
9 and critical assessment is not just a demand of self-centred evaluation by secluded  
10  
11 individuals, but a pointer to the fruitfulness of public discussion and of interactive public  
12  
13 reasoning: social evaluations may be starved of useful information and good arguments if  
14  
15 they are based on separated and sequestered cogitation. Public discussion and deliberation  
16  
17 can lead to a better understanding of the role, reach and significance of particular  
18  
19 functionings and their combinations (Sen, 2009, pp. 241-2).  
20  
21  
22

23  
24 To illustrate this general line of argument, Sen returns to the case of gender inequality in  
25  
26 India and the ‘importance of certain freedoms that did not receive adequate acknowledgement  
27  
28 earlier’ (Sen, 2009, p. 242).  
29  
30

31 If one takes these to be the central ingredients of one potential line of response to  
32  
33 Nussbaum’s objection because it involves a more ‘objective evaluation procedure’ informed  
34  
35 by Sen’s reading of Marx, I suggest that this response is in some respects prefigured in J.S.  
36  
37 Mill’s discussion in *Utilitarianism*, notably his discussion of ‘competent judges’. Suppose  
38  
39 that we ask whether one pleasure is better than another. Mill argued that to answer this sort of  
40  
41 question we might consult the beliefs of people who have experience of both. Mill’s own  
42  
43 discussion centres on pleasures of different qualities. He argued that ‘[o]f two pleasures, if  
44  
45 there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference  
46  
47 ... that is the more desirable pleasure’ (Mill, 1962, pp. 259-260). Various examples which are  
48  
49 used to illustrate this point – involving, for example, a comparison of the pleasures of  
50  
51 Socrates and the fool – might appear rather elitist to some modern readers. But Mill’s  
52  
53 general thought is, in one respect, very similar to Sen’s. Mill clearly doubts the reliability of  
54  
55 people’s judgements and valuations when their experience or position is in some way  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60



1  
2  
3 restricted. Because she has experience or knowledge of both pleasures and can see the world  
4  
5 from the position of people enjoying each, the perspective of the competent judge presumably  
6  
7 would involve trans-positional scrutiny and is informed in a way that someone who has only  
8  
9 experience or knowledge of one pleasure (or kind of pleasure) is not. To this degree, the  
10  
11 perspective of the competent judge is also 'non-parochial' in a way that the perspectives of  
12  
13 others – who are only familiar with one pleasure - might not be. Viewed in this light, Mill's  
14  
15 competent judges might indeed be seen as engaged in trans-positional scrutiny. And this way  
16  
17 of establishing whether or not the judge's view is 'competent' is also a forerunner of modern  
18  
19 versions of the desire account, which understand well-being in terms of rational or informed  
20  
21 desire (see Brandt, 1992, Griffin, 1986 and Railton, 1986 *inter alia* as well as Sidgwick,  
22  
23 1981) or which understand value in terms of higher-order desires (see Lewis, 1989). In  
24  
25 particular the difference, in Sen's work, between what one values and has reason to value is  
26  
27 closely related to the gap between actual desire and informed or rational desire in the  
28  
29 literature on desire views (see, for example, Griffin, 1986, pp. 8-38). For this reason, I  
30  
31 suggest that this aspect of Sen's later development of the capability approach might be  
32  
33 regarded as a not too distant relative of the informed desire view (on this see also Qizilbash,  
34  
35 2013, p. 38). Of course, the relationship between Sen's writings on capability and various  
36  
37 versions of the informed desire view would need further discussion in exploring the links  
38  
39 between desire and value on Sen's view and it is beyond the scope of this paper to address  
40  
41 that question (see Sen, 1985, pp. 188-192). Nonetheless, it is important here that unlike  
42  
43 Nussbaum (2000, pp. 145-161) who is only willing to give informed desire an ancillary role  
44  
45 in her version of the capability view, Sen (1992, p. 54) does not completely exclude the  
46  
47 possibility that his view is compatible with some version of the desire account. As he puts it:  
48  
49 '[t]here is indeed no reason why such desire-based accounting of capabilities and  
50  
51 functionings could not count as a specific version of the capability approach broadly defined'  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 (Sen, 1992, p. 54). However, here he qualifies his remarks by mentioning potential ‘problems  
4 relating to motivational contrasts’ and goes on to cite the problem of small mercies and  
5 adaptation of desires (Sen, 1992, p. 55) which also leads Nussbaum in the end not to give  
6 desire a central role in her view. However, if the informed desire view might address the  
7 concerns Sen raises relating to adaptation and small mercies in the same way that his own  
8 view deals with the gap between what one values and has reason to value, one might  
9 plausibly claim that his view is a variant, or close relative, of the informed desire view which  
10 adds a requirement of trans-positional scrutiny involving public discussion onto the standard  
11 requirements for a desire to count as ‘informed’ or ‘rational’.  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23

24 Sen’s suggestion that our judgements can be rendered more robust and informed through  
25 public discussion is also prefigured in J.S. Mill. In *On Liberty* Mill (1962, p. 145) mounts a  
26 very eloquent defence of the liberty of thought and discussion. In defending this liberty he  
27 asks the following question: ‘[w]hy is it, then, that there is on the whole a preponderance  
28 among mankind of rational opinions and rational conduct?’ And he answers:  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35

36 If there really is this preponderance – which there must be unless human affairs are, and  
37 have always been, in an almost desperate state – it is owing to a quality of the human  
38 mind, the source of everything respectable in man either as an intellectual or as a moral  
39 being, namely that his errors are corrigible. He is capable of rectifying his mistakes, by  
40 discussion and experience. Not by experience alone. There must be discussion to show  
41 how experience is to be interpreted. Wrong opinions and practices gradually yield to fact  
42 and argument; but facts and arguments, to have any effect on the mind, must be brought  
43 before it. (Mill, 1962, pp. 145-6)  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53

54 If one takes this argument seriously one would be inclined to add to the relevant experience  
55 requirement which Mill imposed on the ‘competence’ of judges (who are comparing  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 pleasures) that their views have also been subjected to scrutiny through, and been corrected  
4  
5 through, discussion with others. And if one does that, the view that Mill espoused would also  
6  
7 be related to Sen's, even if Sen's work on objectivity invokes Marx and even if Sen is critical  
8  
9 of utilitarianism while Mill is one of its leading advocates (on this see also Sen, 2006a and  
10  
11 Qizilbash, 2006 and 2008).  
12

13  
14  
15 I must add a note of caution here. Even if one can use the notion of trans-positional  
16  
17 scrutiny in reading Mill's discussion of higher and lower order pleasures, it is not obvious  
18  
19 that the centrality of experience which is crucial in Mill's view can be found in Sen's since  
20  
21 there are many ways in which one might be informed (e.g. through certain forms of  
22  
23 education) which may not actually require experience of various functionings. Furthermore,  
24  
25 while there is some similarity between Sen's views and the informed desire account, there are  
26  
27 different versions of that account and his view is not explicitly developed as a version of that  
28  
29 account. There is, nonetheless, at least one lead about what Sen might think about an  
30  
31 informed desire view which contains an experience requirement of the sort that Mill has in  
32  
33 mind in his discussion of 'competent judges'. Jon Elster considers a version of the 'informed  
34  
35 preference' account according to which: 'one should attach more weight to the preferences of  
36  
37 someone who knows both sides of the question than to someone who has at most experienced  
38  
39 one of the alternatives. These informed preferences are ... informed in the sense of being  
40  
41 grounded in experience, not in the sense of being grounded in the meta-preferences of the  
42  
43 individual' (Elster, 1983, p. 113). As it happens, in motivating this notion of informed  
44  
45 preference, Elster (1983, 112-3) cites any early text of Sen's where Sen discusses the  
46  
47 evaluation of welfare when preferences can change as a result of experience. He writes:  
48  
49  
50  
51

52  
53  
54 Preferences about one's way of life and location are typically the result of one's past  
55  
56 experience and an initial reluctance to move does not imply a perpetual dislike. The  
57  
58 distinction has some bearing on welfare aspects of employment policy, since the  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 importance that one wishes to attach to the wage gap as a reflection of the labourer's  
4 preferences would tend to depend on the extent to which tastes are expected to vary as a  
5 consequence of the movement itself. (Sen, 1975, p. 54)  
6  
7  
8  
9

10 In discussing this passage, Elster suggests that a natural reading of it is that the preferences  
11 one might have about the comparison of city and country life after moving to the city – which  
12 he calls an '*ex post* evaluation' – might justify a migration policy even if someone judges  
13 prior to the move – in their '*ex ante* evaluation' – that she prefers country life. Sen's original  
14 riposte is that this is not a natural reading of his text. He suggests rather that: '[o]ne's  
15 judgement can depend *both* on the *ex ante* and *ex post* preferences of the migrant, and I  
16 should argue that it *should*' (Sen, 1980-1, p.107). Nonetheless, while accepting Sen's  
17 response about how this passage should be read, Elster does not entirely relent from his initial  
18 point and argues that even in the light of Sen's response: 'there must be cases in which *ex*  
19 *ante* preferences can be overridden. If there is a trade-off between *ex ante* and *ex post*  
20 preferences, this must mean that *ex ante* preferences can *sometimes* be overridden.' (Elster,  
21 1983, 113). Or to put the point differently, informed preferences may sometimes override  
22 actual preferences in the evaluation of welfare. It is clear from this complex exchange that  
23 Sen may not – at that time – have accepted a simplistic experience based view of informed  
24 preferences as the standard of welfare. Nonetheless, in evaluating Sen's later views it is not  
25 clear what weight one should give to this exchange with Elster which is played out in  
26 relatively obscure notes to various texts and predates his discussion of positional objectivity  
27 and public reasoning.  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49

#### 50 51 **4. Conclusions.** 52

53  
54 I have argued that through various citations from Karl Marx's works in Amartya Sen's  
55 expositions of the capability approach Sen claims a pedigree for some of his ideas in Marx's  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

work. Indeed, there are undeniably some significant affinities between various texts that Marx wrote or co-authored with Friedrich Engels and Sen's view of development as an expansion of capability. Marx and Engels clearly thought – at least in *The German Ideology* – that in the transformation from capitalism to communism there would be a 'development' of a 'totality of capacities' as people took over the productive forces in society. Furthermore, a significant connection between Marx and Engels' and Sen's works that I have discussed relates to the notion of 'false consciousness' and their respective critiques of utilitarianism. Sen's works on positional objectivity, objective illusion and public reasoning suggest that public reasoning can help to dispel objective illusions through trans-positional scrutiny and can help bridge the gap between what a person values and has reason to value. To this degree, engagement in public reasoning can make evaluations of functionings (including the weight to be given to different functionings) more objective and robust. This is one way in which Sen might respond to those, like Martha Nussbaum, who have argued that he needs to provide a more objective evaluation procedure for the selection of functionings. But while Sen's view of objectivity is developed in relation to the notion of objective illusion for which he claims a pedigree in Marx's views, I have argued that it also echoes John Stuart Mill's discussion of 'competent judges' as well as Mill's remarks about the importance of free discussion in correcting false opinions.

### References

- Brandt, R. (1992) *Morality, Utilitarianism and Rights* Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.
- Cohen, G.A. (2000) *Karl Marx's Theory of History. A Defence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

1  
2  
3 Elster, J. (1983) *Sour Grapes. Studies in the Subversion of Rationality*. Cambridge:  
4  
5 Cambridge University Press.  
6

7  
8 Giddens, A. (1971) *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory. An Analysis of the Writings of*  
9  
10 *Marx, Durkheim and Max Weber*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
11

12  
13 Griffin, J. (1986) *Well-Being: Its Meaning, Measurement and Moral Importance*. Oxford  
14  
15 University Press: Oxford.  
16

17  
18 Haq, M. (1995) *Reflections on Human Development*. Oxford University Press: Oxford.  
19

20  
21 Lewis, D. (1989) 'Dispositional Theories of Value' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*  
22  
23 63, Supplementary Vol., pp. 113-137.  
24

25  
26 Lukács, G. (1995) *The Lukács Reader*, A. Kadarkay (ed), Blackwell: Oxford.  
27

28  
29 Marx, K. (1963) *Early Writings* T. Bottomore (ed) C.A. Watts and Co. Ltd.: London.  
30

31  
32 Marx, K. and F. Engels (1965) *The German Ideology* Progressive Publishers: Moscow.  
33

34  
35 Marx, K. and F. Engels, (1970) *The German Ideology. Part One* C. Arthur (ed). Lawrence  
36  
37 and Wishart: London.  
38

39  
40 Marx, K. (1977a) *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*. D. McLennan (ed) Oxford University Press:  
41  
42 Oxford.  
43

44  
45 Marx, K. (1977b) *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* English Translation. Progressive  
46  
47 Publishers: Moscow.  
48

49  
50 Marx, K. (1978) *The Marx-Engels Reader*. R. Tucker (ed) W.W. Norton: New York and  
51  
52 London.  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 Marx, K. (1990) *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy. Volume 1.* Penguin:  
4  
5 Harmondworth.

6  
7  
8 Mill, J.S. (1962) *Utilitarianism. On Liberty. Essay on Bentham. Together with Selected*  
9  
10 *writings of Jeremy Bentham and John Austin.* M. Warnock (ed.) William Collins Sons & Co.  
11  
12 Ltd.: Glasgow.

13  
14  
15 Nussbaum, M. (1988) 'Nature, Function and Capability: Aristotle on Political Distribution'  
16  
17 *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 6 (Supplementary Vol.), pp. 145-184.

18  
19  
20 Nussbaum, M. (1990) 'Aristotelian Social Democracy' in B. Douglass, G. Mara and H.  
21  
22 Richardson (eds.) *Liberalism and the Good*, Routledge: London, pp. 203-43.

23  
24  
25 Nussbaum, M. (1992) 'Human Functioning and Social Justice. In Defence of Aristotelian  
26  
27 Essentialism' *Political Theory* Vol. 20, pp. 202-246.

28  
29  
30 Nussbaum, M. (2000) *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach.*  
31  
32 Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

33  
34  
35 Nussbaum, M. (2006) *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership.*  
36  
37 Cambridge Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

38  
39  
40 Nussbaum, M. (2011) *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach.*  
41  
42 Cambridge Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

43  
44  
45 Qizilbash, M. (2006) 'Capability, Happiness and Adaptation in Sen and J.S. Mill' *Utilitas:*  
46  
47 Vol. 18, pp. 20-32.

48  
49  
50 Qizilbash, M. (2007) 'Social Choice and Individual Capabilities' *Politics, Philosophy and*  
51  
52 *Economics* Vol. 6, pp. 169-192.

1  
2  
3 Qizilbash, M. (2008) 'Amartya Sen's Capability Approach: Insightful Sketch or Distorted  
4 Picture?' in F. Comim, M. Qizilbash and S. Alkire (eds.) *The Capability Approach:  
5 Concepts, Measures and Applications*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.  
6  
7

8  
9  
10 Qizilbash, M. (2013) 'On Capability and the Good Life: Theoretical Debates and their  
11 Practical Implications' *Philosophy and Public Policy Quarterly* Vol. 31, pp. 35-42.  
12

13  
14  
15 Railton, P. (1986) 'Moral Realism' *The Philosophical Review* Vol. 95, pp. 163-207.  
16

17  
18  
19 Sen, A. (1975) *Employment, Technology and Development*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.  
20

21  
22 Sen, A. (1980-1) 'Plural Utility' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 81: 193-215.  
23

24  
25 Sen, A. (1985) 'Well-Being, Agency and Freedom: The Dewey Lectures 1984' *Journal of  
26 Philosophy* Vol. LXXXII, pp. 169-221.  
27

28  
29  
30 Sen, A. (1990) 'Development as Capability Expansion' in K. Griffin and J. Knight (eds)  
31 *Human Development and the International Development Strategy for the 1990s*. New York:  
32 MacMillan.  
33  
34

35  
36  
37 Sen, A. (1992) *Inequality Re-examined* Oxford: Clarendon Press.  
38

39  
40 Sen, A. (1993a) 'Positional Objectivity' *Philosophy and Public Affairs* Vol. 22 pp. 126-145.  
41

42  
43 Sen, A. (1993b) 'Capability and Well-Being' in M. Nussbaum and A. Sen (eds) *The Quality  
44 of Life* Oxford: Clarendon Press.  
45  
46

47  
48  
49 Sen, A. (2002) *Rationality and Freedom* Cambridge, Mass. And London, England: Belknap  
50 Press of Harvard University Press.  
51

52  
53 Sen, A. (2006a) 'Reason, Freedom and Well-Being' *Utilitas* Vol. 18, pp. 80-96.  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60



1  
2  
3 Sen, A. (2006b) 'What Do We Want from A Theory of Justice?' *Journal of Philosophy* Vol.  
4  
5 103, pp. 215-238.  
6  
7

8 Sen, A. (2009) *The Idea of Justice*. London: Allen Lane.  
9

10  
11 Sidgwick, H. (1981) *The Method of Ethics*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.  
12  
13

---

14  
15 <sup>1</sup> As we have seen, Sen also connects the concepts of objective illusion and 'false  
16  
17 consciousness' to Marx's discussion of 'commodity fetishism'. On this see Marx's discussion  
18  
19 of 'commodity fetishism' and the 'political economist's bourgeois consciousness' in *Capital:*  
20  
21 *Volume 1* (Marx, 1990, pp. 174-6). For a reading of Marx which helpfully elucidates the  
22  
23 connection see also Cohen (2000, pp. 125-129).  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60