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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### CATEGORIZING COLLECTIVE CAPABILITIES

**Francesca Rosignoli**  
*Stockholm University*

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**ABSTRACT:** In recent years, a growing body of literature has started to take up the issue of collectivity within the capability approach, by particularly examining the notion of collective capabilities, the reasons for using this concept, its critiques and limitations. However, a proper categorization of collective capabilities aiming at defining which types of capabilities actually are, is rarely studied. The goal of this contribution is to fill such gap by categorizing collective capabilities as well as providing a specific list of collective combined capabilities. The list includes two collective capabilities: the 'resistant capability' and the 'resilient capability'. After having briefly outlined the most recent contributions of the capability theorists for including the issue of the collectivity within the Capability Approach (CA), I then proceed as follows. First, I examine what collective capabilities are and why they matter for the CA. Second, I provide a categorization of collective capabilities based on the ontological difference between collective and individual capabilities. Third, the resulting extension of Nussbaum's version of the CA is carried out by including a specific list for collective combined capabilities. Finally, I investigate how this extension affects Nussbaum's CA.

**KEYWORDS:** collective capabilities, collective subject, collective will, capability threshold, collectivity.

**CORRESPONDING AUTHORS:** Francesca Rosignoli, [f.rosignoli@yahoo.it](mailto:f.rosignoli@yahoo.it)

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## 1. Introduction

One fundamental area of dispute among capability theorists is that the capability approach (CA) is too individualistic.

Notwithstanding the version of the CA of Nussbaum and Sen differ in some regards (Clark, 2005:6-8; Robeyns, 2005:103-107), the critique of a narrow focus on the individual can be applied to both scholars<sup>1</sup>.

Although Sen (1999) acknowledges the instrumental value of collective organizations and social relationships in expanding or constraining individual freedoms (Sen 2002; Robeyns 2005; Godfrey-Wood & Mamani-Vargas 2017), he is rather careful in accepting the concept of 'collective capabilities' as those capabilities resulting from collective action still remain "socially dependent individual capabilities"(Sen 2002: 85).

Similarly, Nussbaum's version of the CA remains within an individualistic framework because, as she clearly puts it:

the person, not the group, is the primary subject of political justice, and policies that improve the lot of a group are to be rejected unless they deliver the central capabilities to each and every person. In these ways, my approach to the issue of care lies squarely within the liberal tradition (Nussbaum, 2006: 216).

In response to this, several authors have therefore discussed the urgent need to introduce collective capabilities. In answering the questions why and how the concept of collective capabilities<sup>2</sup> can be integrated in the analysis of human capabilities (Ibrahim, 2006), capability theorists have provided different pathways. In order to frame the topic of collectivity through the lens of the CA, some authors have given more relevance to the *internal* individual perspective, while others on the *external and descriptive* perspective (Leßmann and Roche, 2013). More specifically, a first strand of research focuses on how collectivities can enhance individuals' *well-being* in terms of capabilities (Ibrahim, 2013), while a second strand gives more emphasis on *agency*, going beyond

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<sup>1</sup> See also the different position over this point and the lively debate summarized by Robeyns in (Robeyns 2005).

<sup>2</sup> The term 'collective capabilities' was first used by Peter Evans (Evans 2002). Since then, the literature has labelled these new capabilities by using the following, different terms: collective capabilities (Ibrahim 2006; Evans 2002; Ballet et al. 2007), group capabilities (Stewart 2005), relational capabilities (Dubois, J.L., Lompo, K., Giraud, G. Renouard 2008), joint capabilities (Hall 2017), and external capabilities (Handy 2008).

individuals' well-being (Volkert 2013; Davis 2013; Ballet et al. 2007; Deneulin 2006)<sup>3</sup>. A further strand has then explored the idea of collective capabilities in the context of the struggles of indigenous peoples. In particular, Schlosberg and Carruthers (Schlosberg & Carruthers 2010) point out how the notion of collective capabilities is present in the practice of indigenous peoples' movements for ecological justice, while Murphy (Murphy 2014) suggests considering the political self-determination (of indigenous groups) as a collective capability, by highlighting the instrumental value of collective political empowerment in the developmental process.

Nevertheless, among numerous attempts provided by capability theorists, one of the most significant contributions with regard to the main goal of this paper, i.e. categorizing collective capabilities, is that of Stewart, who argued first that group capabilities should be considered as a distinct category (Stewart 2005). First, because they enhance well-being, second because they provide a mechanism for the enlargement of individual capabilities, and finally because they influence preferences and values helping to determine which capabilities individuals value (Stewart, 2005). Also, as pointed out by Stewart, since groups are usually instrumental to achieve some wider purpose, it is worth noting that not every group aspires to noble ends. It follows that at least two groups can be identified: the group formed by the better off, that might increase inequalities and be evaluated negatively; and groups formed by poor people, that are more likely to pursue just income distribution and poverty eradication (Stewart 2005). In doing so, she sheds a light on how inequalities of group capabilities are important not only because they can reduce people's individual well-being, but also as the central source of conflicts (e.g. environmental conflicts). As clearly reported by Stewart

horizontal inequalities are multidimensional, including political as well as economic and social dimensions. Deprivation (or fear of deprivation) of group access to political resources can be a powerful source of resentment and mobilisation. In economic dimensions, it is not only a matter of income, but also of assets and jobs. In social dimensions, it is a question of social

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<sup>3</sup> In this regard, it is worth noting Deneulin's contribution as one of the first capability theorists who recognizes how the exercise of individual agency is of little effect in removing un-freedoms. In a similar line of investigation, see also Ballet et al. who try to extend Sen's CA by introducing the issues of personal responsibility and collective capability (Ballet et al. 2007). The primary aim of the authors is to replace the notion of the subject as a 'faceless' individual used by the analytical philosophy approach with the enriched notion of the subject used by the phenomenological approach. The reason for favouring this second understanding of the subject relies on the possibility of achieving a stronger version of agency. According to the authors, while the concept of agency rooted in the subject as 'faceless' individual is apparently weak; the introduction of the personal responsibility of the subject used by the phenomenological approach leads to a strong version of agency.

outcomes (such as health or nutrition outcomes) and also access to social services of different kinds. What we are talking of here are basically group capabilities (and sources of capabilities) of various kinds (Stewart, 2005:192).

In exploring the question concerning how the concept of collective capabilities can be integrated in the analysis of human capabilities, however, Stewart does not seem to provide a proper strategy, rather a general definition of group capabilities as “the average of the capabilities (and sources of capabilities) of all the individuals in the selected groups” (Stewart, 2005:192). Similarly, other capability theorists, such as Comim and Carey, seek to define such group/collective capabilities as “those capabilities that can only be achieved socially ... as a result of social interaction” (Comim and Carey, 2001:17).

As a result, despite Stewart's efforts in showing the link between group achievements/inequalities (or horizontal inequalities) and group mobilisation, and other capability theorists' efforts to define collective capabilities, it seems that all those attempts fail to provide a collective capabilities' categorization. What all those proposals have in common is that, rather than conceiving collective capabilities as new capabilities, they are more like to frame them as the 'environment' within which individual capabilities can be located. In other words, what they call 'collective capabilities' is simply a collective framework for (enhancing) individual capabilities.

Unlike this part of the literature, Ibrahim takes the question seriously, by arguing that collective capabilities

are not simply the sum (or average) of individual capabilities, but rather new capabilities that the individual alone would neither have nor be able to achieve, if he/she did not join a collectivity. Collective capabilities affect individual choices in two ways: first, they affect the individual's perception of the good (i.e. what constitutes a 'valuable functioning' for him/her) and, secondly, they determine his/her ability to achieve these functionings (Ibrahim, 2006:404).

As explained above, whether conceived as the average of individual capabilities, or capabilities that can only be achieved as a result of social interaction, collective capabilities are likely to be more than the sum of individual capabilities, being new, distinct capabilities to be categorized.

To this end, the article tries to contribute to the debate by identifying a specific list of collective combined capabilities. The main purpose of this article is indeed to extend Nussbaum's version of the capabilities approach by identifying, categorizing and includ-

ing a specific list for collective combined capabilities composed of resistant capability<sup>4</sup> and resilient capability.

In doing so, the paper first examines what collective capabilities are and why are they important. Second, it provides a categorization of collective capabilities based on the ontological difference between collective and individual capabilities. Third, it provides a specific list for collective combined capabilities. Finally, the paper moves into question of how this extension affects Nussbaum's version of the capabilities approach.

## 2. What collective capabilities are and why they are important

Collective capabilities can be defined as those capabilities exercised by a group – or more generally by a collective subject – that acts “in order to secure a capability for the members of that group” (Robeyns 2017:116).

In this regard, collective capabilities radically diverge from those capabilities that the literature has labelled as *external capabilities*, i.e. capabilities only accessible by direct connection or relationship with others (Handy 2008). Indeed, *external capabilities* ultimately reside in the individual's capability set as both the action and the achieved functioning are individual. An example of *external capability* is children's wide range of activities that are achievable only by the care of a parent (Handy 2008). In this example, the subject is not a group and the action is not collective accordingly.

By contrast, collective capabilities ontologically differ from other individual capabilities as both the action taken and the achieved functioning are collective. This is the case of first women's movement fighting for acquiring the capability to vote in elections. The subject is definitely a group, the action is necessarily collective, and the capabilities obtained are for all the members of the group (Robeyns 2017).

Given the definition of collective capabilities, why should we introduce this new category within Nussbaum's version of the CA?

The rationale behind the introduction of collective capabilities partly relies on the fact that Nussbaum's version of the CA is designed to offer the philosophical grounding for constitutional principles, when the implementation of such principles depends on the internal politics of the nation. However, economic globalization in its most recent

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<sup>4</sup> I am very grateful to the anonymous referee who suggested me to change the term 'negative capability' I initially used for the term 'resistant capability' to avoid confusion with malevolent capability used in the literature.

form has been limiting the capacity of governments to ensure the *threshold level* of basic rights for all citizens.

Leaving aside the debate on the unsuccessful austerity measures used to boost competitiveness and economic efficiency, one of the causes of the current crisis of the welfare state can be also identified in the excessive emphasis on the individual capabilities and individual agency, rather than considering the added-value of including collective capabilities and collective agency respectively.

Although the causality between good governance and the degree of citizen's engagement has been discussed at length in the literature (Putnam 1993; Bourdieu 1985; Coleman 1988; Coleman 1990)<sup>5</sup>, over the years the vice of modern democracy has been to promote individualism and an unwillingness to engage in public affairs (Fukuyama 2000 : 7). Thus, the impacts of globalisation and such excessive individualism have led to the *incapacity* of modern liberal democracies to ensure *the threshold level of each capability*, i.e. that level of well-being "beneath which it is held that truly human functioning is not available to citizens" (Nussbaum, 2000:6).

In view of this, the sole individualistic focus of the CA appears substantially unsuitable to face the challenges arising from globalization. A greater consideration of a collective dimension of capabilities to foster the removal of un-freedoms and the expansion of citizens' capabilities seems therefore necessary.

In this regard, collective capabilities are intended to provide a sort of *horizontal instrument* to groups, in addition to and separate from, the unsuccessful *vertical instrument* resulting from the interaction between State and every single citizen. Such distinction between horizontal and vertical instruments has been initially analysed by the civil versus government social capital debate<sup>6</sup>.

Particular attention to this topic has been first devoted by Robert Putnam who points out that

the fact that vertical networks are less helpful than horizontal networks in solving dilemmas of collective action may be one reason why capitalism turned out to be more

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<sup>5</sup> The importance of 'social capability' for economic growth has been also emphasized in the findings of Temple and Johnson (Temple & Johnson 1998). In this regard, see also World Bank Social Capital Initiative studies that show the effects of social relations and informal institutions in individual livelihoods and wider development outcomes. The results demonstrate that networks and the norms of reciprocity are crucial in activating collective endeavours that may help development initiatives (Grootaert, Christiaan Bastelaer 2001).

<sup>6</sup> For a critical examination of the literature on social capital and governmental institution, see among others (Breuskin 2012; Fukuyama 2000; Ramos-pinto 2004).

efficient than feudalism in the eighteenth century, and why democracy has proven more effective than autocracy in the twentieth century” (Putnam 1993:175).

Making no pretence to offer a comprehensive discussion of “the culture-vs.- structure, chicken-and-eggs debate” (Putnam 1993 : 181), i.e. whether social capital is the driving motor of political performances or rather the outcome of political institutional arrangements, this article argues the interaction between civil society and governmental institutions by the notion of collective capabilities.

In other words, the incapacity of modern liberal democracies to achieve the social goal of getting citizens above the capability threshold might be compensated by recognizing this *horizontal instrument*, i.e. collective capabilities, to the groups acting to make certain rights working for improving living conditions of both the group, and its members. Thus, given the centrality of substantial freedoms within the CA (Sen, 1999:18) in its twofold understanding of removing un-freedoms and expanding citizens’ capabilities, the collective capabilities examined below (resistant capability and resilient capability) are designed to cover both aspects.

#### *The added-value of resistant capability*

By the term *resistant capability*, I refer to the *negative moment* of every social mobilization concerned with the right of resistance. The resistant capability is conceived as opposition and resistance against top-down decisions generating structural injustices imposed by authorities upon any group. In doing so, the resistant capability is intended as instrumental for removing substantial un-freedoms, by preventing affected groups from getting below the capability threshold (Nussbaum, 2000).

This idea of resisting against *fixed schemes of division and hierarchy* can be well traced back to the traditional social contract theory of John Locke and to his *right to resistance* and/or *self-defence* of the people. In *Two Treatises of Government* (1690), Locke affirms that “the people [...] have the right to resume their original liberty” (Locke, 1690: 360), that means an explicit right to overthrow a government when it acts against people's interests – e.g. by reducing citizens to slavery – (Locke, 1690: 359-360). In most recent times, Roberto Unger applies this idea of resistance to the following concept of negative capability<sup>7</sup> as instrumental to empower democracy.

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<sup>7</sup> In a completely different conception, the term ‘negative capability’ was first used by John Keats, the Romantic English poet, in order to criticize those who attempted to classify all experience and phenomena and transform them into a theory of knowledge. Keats defined the concept as follows: “I mean Negative

... all the varieties of individual and collective empowerment seem to be connected in one way or another with the mastery the concept of disentanglement or denaturalization describes. I call these varieties of empowerment “negative capability” when considering them in relation to the context change that makes them possible. Thus, we may use the poet's turn of phrase to label the empowerment that arises from the denial of whatever in our contexts delivers us over to a fixed scheme of division and hierarchy and to an enforced choice between routine and rebellion (Unger, 1997:174).

Rather than providing the theoretical framework for establishing/justifying anarchy, Unger's definition of negative capability is more likely to aim at safeguarding/empowering democracy.

In other words, he seems to suggest the grounding of a sort of doctrine of empowered democracy, where empowerment largely depends on the invention of more dis-entrenched, revisable institutions.

In turn, the improvement of institutions is pursued by an alternative practical empowerment to promote economic and technological progress as well as democratic ideals. To this end, strengthening negative capability looks therefore very promising<sup>8</sup>.

Despite the similarities reported above, my conception of resistant capability radically diverges from both Locke and Unger in at least one respect: the subject entitled to exercise the resistant capability.

Both Unger and Locke, indeed, generally belong to the liberal individualistic tradition that largely rests on the priority of individuals as well as basic individual rights. As a result, Locke still identifies the rather indistinct category of people as the subject of the revolution, while Unger mainly focuses on the negative capability of individuals and therefore on the individual rather than on the collective empowerment.

Unlike such priority on individuals, whether the mere sum or aggregation of individuals, I hold that such capacity to resistance is a specific prerogative of a supra-individual subject that I call *collective subject*<sup>9</sup>. Conceived as something more than a mere sum of individuals, it includes any group acting to make a right working in the concrete life of both the group as a collective subject, and its members, improving their living conditions.

Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts,<sup>1</sup> without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Keats, 1899: 177).

<sup>8</sup> The need to include the collective dimension within CA to empower citizens and particularly the most disadvantaged, can be also found in (Ibrahim, 2013:7) and (Volkert, 2013:11-12).

<sup>9</sup> Its main features and characteristics will be widely discussed in the next paragraph.



To sum up, neither isolated individuals, nor people, but any group that acts as a collective subject for improving the living conditions of both the group, and its members, is therefore the subject of the resistant capability.

In this regard, trade unions can be considered an example of a collective subject. As pointed out by Marx, they have the agency to negotiate with the counterpart in order to make rights effective.

The value of labour-power constitutes the conscious and explicit foundation of the trade unions, whose importance for the [...] working class can scarcely be overestimated. The trade unions aim at nothing less than to prevent the reduction of wages below the level that is traditionally maintained in the various branches of industry. That is to say, they wish to prevent the price of labour-power from falling below its value (Marx, 1867: 1069).

Admittedly, trade unions were established exactly to represent the collective interests of workers in negotiations with employers. The primary aim was indeed to oppose the more powerful employer (whether a single individual or a collective body like a company) by the means of a subject with equal power: the trade union. The core idea was that the single, isolated worker could not be able to resist company's power, being definitely unequal in power. Conversely, a group of workers characterized by a sense of collective injustice had the capacity to resist against company's pressure, or, at least, more possibilities to succeed in that. Described by Dorceta Taylor as follows,

the sense of collective injustice was both a hot cognition and a cognitive liberator for many. The sense of collective harms deepened people's outrage at the same time that it deepened their conviction to change conditions. The experiences encouraged people to adopt collective action strategies rather than trying to solve issues as isolated individuals or community groups (Taylor, 2000:561).

Thus, trade unions arose from the spontaneous coalition of the same stakeholders (workers' associations) based on the awareness that the socioeconomic weakness characterizing the position of each of them towards their employers could be overcome only through a collective action<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Along the same line of reasoning, see also (Volkert, 2013:11): "collectivities have the ability to overcome people's lack of effective power which establishes effective power as a constitutive element of direct agency. They also counteract disempowering processes that may prevent people from acting or from bringing about change".

Given that the removal of substantial un-freedoms is constitutive of development (Sen 1999), it follows that the added-value of resistant capability is to provide a precious instrument of empowerment of a collectivity by the means of collective action.

As Evans puts it “for the less privileged attaining development as freedom requires collective action. Organized collectivities – unions, political parties, village councils, women’s group, etc. —are fundamental to ‘people’s capabilities to choose the lives they have reason to value’” (Evans, 2002:56). In doing this, discriminated groups, such as low-income people, ethnic minorities, and so forth can (only) collectively achieve the social goal of getting above the capability threshold.

By acting together and therefore exercising such new type of collective capability, any group affected by structural injustices might be able to re-establish equal power relation and to remove forms of un-freedoms.

In other words, *the resistant capability (like collective capabilities as such) belongs to any group, but its exercise is subjected to certain external conditions*. Examples of external conditions are: structural injustices, forms of discrimination/lack of recognition, hazard events, top-down decisions imposed upon groups, earthquakes, climate change impacts, environmental injustices.

Recognizing the exercise of the resistant capability to groups affected by such examples of external conditions means giving them a precious instrument for removing forms of un-freedoms, pursuing a just income distribution and poverty eradication (Stewart 2005). As noted above concerning Unger's understanding of the issue, this idea has nothing to do with anarchy. Conversely, the idea of collective capabilities as instrumental for grounding a doctrine of empowered democracy can be also applied to my proposal.

#### *The added-value of resilient capability*

As discussed above about the need to provide a collective dimension of capabilities, the sole individual agency does not succeed in removing un-freedoms (e.g. eradication of poverty), and in increasing capabilities to promote human freedoms.

Whereas the resistant capability is more likely to cover the first aspect (i.e. the removal of un-freedoms) by increasing group’s collective capacity to resist to structural injustices, the resilient capability concerns with the second goal of increasing the collective capability to promote human freedoms.

By this second term, i.e. *resilient capability*, I refer to the capacity of any group to react constructively to structural injustices by the means of: self-help initiatives, adap-

tive strategies and collective agency<sup>11</sup>. In other words, the resilient capability represents the positive moment in which constructive responses of any group affected by unfavourable external conditions<sup>12</sup> preventing the exercise of their major functions do contribute to the expansion of their freedoms. As noted above, such expansion positively affects the promotion of human freedoms and well-being of citizens accordingly. The more human freedoms are pursued, the more the expected level of well-being (capability threshold) can be achieved.

In addition, the resilient capability discussed in this article is based on the concept of resilience<sup>13</sup> examined in its complementarity with the concept of resistance. Thus, just like the notion of resistance has been used to explain the resistant capability, resilience is mobilized to examine the resilient capability. As largely discussed by the literature, resilience and resistance are conceived as interlinked and complementary concepts (Bodin and Wiman, 2004). Whereas resistance measures to what extent a system can persist despite high levels of external pressure<sup>14</sup>, resilience is generally described as the “capacity for successful adaptation in the face of disturbance, stress, or adversity” (Norris, Stevens, Pfefferbaum, Wyche, and Pfefferbaum, 2008 :129).

Examples of the application of resilience within the realm of capability approach can be notably found in Benoit Lallau's work. By using the framework of CA, Lallau explores the complex relationship between vulnerability and resilience in order to study poor peasant risk management strategies (Lallau 2008). The poverty traps dynamics are investigated in their close link to vulnerability, while resilience as a precious instrument to reduce both. In particular, Lallau refers to resilience as a “capacité de synthèse” (Lallau 2008 : 182). Based on the active and reactive behaviour of the individual in the face of environment, resilience is examined through the lens of risk management strategies adopted. In turn, those latter are analysed in their twofold *défensif* (tending to maintain the existing) and *offensif* nature (trying to modify, or even break with the existing) (Lallau 2008 : 182). Such defensive and offensive nature of risk management

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<sup>11</sup> For a critical examination of social capital as an asset or a resource for resilience see (Ledogar & Fleming 2008); for a deeper discussion on self-help analysis and the CA see (Ibrahim 2006).

<sup>12</sup> As explained above concerning the resistant capability, examples of unfavourable external conditions are: structural injustices, forms of discrimination/lack of recognition, hazard events, top-down decisions imposed upon groups, earthquakes, climate change impacts, environmental injustices.

<sup>13</sup> The concept of resilience is a controversial one. It has been used in a large range of disciplines (physics, mathematics, ecology, engineering, psychology, sociology, geography, anthropology, public health, technology and communications), defined by them in different ways, and with different levels of meaning. For a useful list of definitions see (Norris, Stevens, Pfefferbaum, Wyche, and Pfefferbaum, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Resistance is also defined as “the amount of external pressure needed to bring about a given amount of disturbance in the system” (Carpenter, Walker, Anderies, and Abel, 2001:766).

strategies can be easily associated with, and introduced in the CA by the concepts of resistant and resilient capability.

However, unlike Lallau and the existent literature on this topic, the peculiarity of both resistant and resilient capability relies on the subject entitled to exercise these collective capabilities: the collective subject. As previously argued for the resistant capacity, the collective subject is more than a mere sum of individuals, and includes any group acting to make a right working for improving the living conditions of both the group and its members.

Similarly, the resilient capability is therefore exercised by the collective subject, rather than isolated individuals. A mere collection of resilient individuals, indeed, does not guarantee a resilient group (Pfefferbaum et al. 2005; Rose, 2004).

This consideration confirms both the initial argumentation concerning the need of considering collective capabilities as new capabilities distinct from individual capabilities, and the opening premise that the capacity to cope with structural injustice can be (successfully) achieved only through collective actions.

Evidence of the importance of collective agency can be also found in the literature combining community social capital research and the concept of resilience (Ledogar & Fleming 2008). According to this strand of research, community social capital (Putnam 1993), sometimes called “ecological social capital” (McKenzie et al. 2002; Whitley and McKenzie 2005), is generally described as made up of five components (Whitley & McKenzie 2005; De Silva et al. 2005; Putnam 1993):

- community networks: voluntary, state, and personal networks;
- civic engagement: participation and civic networks;
- local civic identity: sense of belonging, of solidarity and of equality with other members of the community;
- reciprocity and norms of cooperation;
- trust in the community.

All these components constitute illustrative examples/aspects of community social capital (or simply collective agency) activated in circumstances that may present a danger/injustice to groups. In such circumstances, indeed, collective agency is crucial to allow any group affected by hazard events to react constructively to structural injustices and to contribute to the expansion of their freedoms.

To conclude, when growing inequalities reduce the size and the scope of the welfare state so as to increase the number of groups affected by a decrease in the well-being, and in the basic level of rights, recognizing a *horizontal instrument* such as the resilient capability can contribute significantly to the democratic empowerment of the collectivity.

In this regard, any collective subject will better cope with collective injustices by a *collective instrument* such as the collective capabilities. Thus, the expansion of citizens' capabilities (i.e. their access and opportunity to do things that they have reason to value) can be better pursued by enhancing collective agency.

### 3. Categorizing Collective Capabilities

The first challenge of this article is to categorize collective capabilities within Nussbaum's version of the capabilities approach.

As Nussbaum puts it (Nussbaum, 2000), capabilities can be distinguished as follows.

- (1) Basic capabilities constitute "the innate equipment of individuals that is the necessary basis for developing the more advanced capabilities, and a ground of moral concern" (Nussbaum, 2000: 84).
- (2) Internal capabilities are "developed states of the person herself that are, so far as the person herself is concerned, sufficient conditions for the exercise of the requisite functions" (Nussbaum, 2000: 84). Although, as Nussbaum points out, the support from the surrounding environment is often required to develop such internal capabilities.
- (3) Combined capabilities are defined as "internal capabilities *combined with* suitable external conditions for the exercise of the function" (Nussbaum, 2000: 84-85).

Given Nussbaum's distinction related to the three types of capabilities (basic, internal, combined), the first question is: which type of capabilities are the collective capabilities? Are they an additional type of capabilities or can be included in one of the provided distinctions?

In addressing the question, I proceed by analysing the main difference between individual and collective capabilities. Yet, this latter relies on the ontological distinction given by the different subjects exercising those capabilities. Whereas individual capabilities are exercised by individuals, collective capabilities are exercised by a collective subject. In other words, the need to provide a collective dimension of capabilities is ultimately addressed by introducing the following notion of collective subject<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> See (Ballet et al. 2007) who tries to extend Sen's CA by replacing the analytical philosophy's notion of a 'faceless' individual with the concept of person. Provided by the phenomenological approach, the concept of person is considered by Ballet as the subject that best corresponds to his vision, including major awareness of personal responsibility; see also (Hall 2017) who builds the notion of joint capabilities upon Margaret Gilbert's concept of *plural subject agents*.

The collective subject is a supra-individual subject. It is not simply the sum of individuals. It represents a new category that can no longer be included in the broader socio-political categories of 'society', 'people', or (exclusively) 'political party'. As it differs from the mere sum or aggregation of individuals, as the sum  $A+B+C+D$  would suggest, it is conceived as follows:  $(A+B+C+D) = (A+B+C+D+\epsilon)$ . Although the main reference concerning the meaning of collective subject comes from Gramsci's concept of 'organic intellectual' (Gramsci 2007), the concept of collective subject examined in this article differs from it at least for the following aspect. While Gramsci identifies the 'organic intellectual' with the communist party, or 'Modern Prince' (Gramsci 2007), I argue that the collective subject may include any form of organized collectivities.

In dwelling upon what actually the collective subject is about, I then proceed by analysing differences and similarities of this concept with Gramsci's 'Modern Prince'.

In order to deceive the prison censors, Gramsci calls the communist party 'Modern Prince' and describes it as follows:

the modern Prince, the myth-Prince, cannot be a real person, a concrete individual. It can only be an organism, a social component in which a collective will – one that is recognized and, to some extent, has asserted itself in action – has already begun to take shape. Historical development has already produced this organism, and it is the political party – the modern formation that contains the partial collective wills with a propensity to become universal and total (Gramsci, 2007: 247).

The concept of collective will outlined by Gramsci, recognized and partly asserted itself in action, requires the existence of a particular kind of awareness. This cannot be an individual awareness, i.e. of a concrete individual, but of a collective organism. In turn, such collective organism, that Gramsci identifies with the political party, will give practical effect to already existing ideas and aspirations.

To sum up, in Gramsci's view the collectivity might be seen as the result of a collective will and collective thinking achieved through concrete individual effort, rather than of an inevitable process occurred outside the individuals. In such context, the political party has the main goal to identify those partial collective wills, in order to make them universal and total, i.e. applicable to the whole of society and to each member.

Although many aspects listed by Gramsci are included in my analysis, the collective subject I propose differs from its description in two respects.

- 1) Unlike the organic intellectual, the collective subject examined here may include any form of organized collectivities acting for making a right working in the concrete life of both the group, and its members.

- 2) The main goal of the collective subject is not to awake any national-popular collective will, but to allow groups to organize themselves collectively for removing forms of un-freedoms and expanding their capabilities, when affected by unfavourable external conditions.

The first difference is that the collective subject I propose is not identified solely with the political party. Rather, it may include any form of organized collectivities, such as: unions, political parties, village councils, women's group, Citizen Assembly, etc. In other words, all those forms of association able to ensure people's capabilities to choose the lives they have reason to value (Sen 1999) when the State fails to accomplish this task.

The second difference is that, unlike Gramsci, the collective subject introduced here is not intended to awake any national-popular collective will, having a much more limited scope instead: allowing groups to organize themselves collectively for removing forms of un-freedoms and expanding their capabilities.

The 'collective will' expressed by the collective subject radically diverges from Rousseau's 'general will' and partly differs from Gramsci's use of the term in the following respects. Unlike Rousseau, individuals who constitute the collective subject are not the body of the people. Rather than associations of citizens collectively called 'the people', the collective subject includes any group subjected to capability deprivation.

As for Gramsci's use of the term, while the modern Prince (i.e. the political party) is designed for promoting the forging of a collective will able to unite the people and nation, the collective will examined in the present paper is closely related to the purpose for which the collective subject has been constituted: for getting citizens above the capability threshold. In other words, the forging of the collective will at stake in this article is strictly linked to the achievement of the goals mentioned for describing the added-value of resistant and resilient capabilities: pursuing a just income distribution and poverty eradication or promoting human freedoms and well-being, respectively. Those goals are pursued by the means of collective action. As noted in the previous paragraph concerning the *resilient capability*, a detailed list of collective actions will be not provided, as this list would be too generic, or simply too abstract. By contrast, a group-based definition of concrete actions realizing collective capabilities would be highly desirable. At any rate, self-help initiatives and adaptive strategies can be well mentioned as key examples of the collective action taken by the collective subject. The only feature that seems essential for any kind of collective action is that it is always dictated by the collective will and therefore aims at getting citizens above the capability threshold.

To conclude, the common denominator of all the above mentioned concepts is the main purpose for which collective capabilities have been categorized. Admittedly, the

collective will as well as the collective action put into operation by the collective subject is outcomes-oriented: tackling the capability deprivation. Ultimately, the main purpose is to provide a *horizontal instrument* to groups affected by a decrease in the well-being, and in the basic level of rights in order to collectively achieve what might not be achieved individually.

In a nutshell, the collective subject is the expression of a collective will, and it is able to take collective action aimed at getting above the capability threshold those individuals who fall below it.

Having accomplished such brief overview of the ontological distinction between individual and collective capabilities, three hypotheses in order to outline which type of capability the collective capabilities are, are listed as follows.

The first hypothesis might be to consider collective capabilities as a subcategory of combined capabilities. In doing so, collective capabilities might be defined as the specific substantial freedoms of collectivity. However, a closer inspection of the issue suggests to reject this hypothesis on the ground that the combined capabilities are the result of the combination between *internal capabilities* and external conditions. This implies therefore the combination of *individual capabilities* which, however, ontologically differ from collective capabilities.

This limitation leads us to go beyond Nussbaum's categorization by taking into account the *external* rather than *internal capabilities*. This second hypothesis, in fact, might be to add a new category conceived as the combination of *external capabilities* and external conditions.

External capabilities are defined as "those abilities to function that are conferred by direct connection or relationship with another person" (Handy, 2008:1). In other words, external capabilities largely depend on an individual's access to the capabilities of another person (Handy, 2008:8). Accordingly, the added-value of external capabilities consists of taking the social context into greater account. However, despite such second hypothesis may well turn out to be telling, it is only partially feasible for the following objection. External capabilities do not likewise ontologically differ from other individual capabilities as they ultimately reside in the individual's capability set.

As a result, even the external capabilities do not push beyond the individualistic framework of the CA, since the individual is still considered the reference point.

As pointed out by Jackson et. al,

the notion of external capabilities recognises social context while retaining the individual as reference point – it lingers on the margins of the capability approach, which is more comfortable with internal capabilities, and gives only a partial view of the economy; a complete



view would examine structural and social factors directly, not through the eyes of the individual (Jackson, Otto, & Ziegler, 2014: 15).

It follows that external capabilities cannot be used to constitute a specific category for collective capabilities.

The inescapable, ontological distinction between individual and collective capabilities leads us to opt in favour of the third hypothesis: the introduction of a separate category entitled *collective combined capabilities*, conceived as the combination of *collective capabilities* and external conditions (e.g. structural injustices, forms of discrimination/lack of recognition, hazard events, top-down decisions imposed upon groups, earthquakes, climate change impacts, environmental injustices). This argumentation is based on the assumption that collective capabilities are ontologically distinct from individual capabilities.

Indeed, *collective capabilities* can be defined as those capabilities that the individual alone would not be able to achieve, without joining a collectivity (adapted from Ibrahim, 2006: 398). Accordingly, this suggests to take into due account the topic of the autonomy of the collective subject, by looking at those capacities (only) ascribable to the collectivity itself. In a similar line of criticism (but with different outcomes) of Ballet (Ballet et al. 2007), I propose to replace the notion of the subject as a 'faceless' individual used by the analytical philosophy approach with the enriched notion of the collective subject described above.

In addition to and separate from the *combined capabilities* (internal capabilities combined with external conditions), a specific, additional category entitled *collective combined capabilities* – resulting from the combination of collective capabilities and external conditions – is to be included.

To sum up, the extension proposed in this paper allows us to list five rather than three types of capabilities – i.e. basic, internal, combined, collective, and collective combined capabilities – by adding collective and collective combined capabilities as new types of capabilities.

A further question addressed in the following paragraph is therefore how this new categorization will affect the list of *combined capabilities* provided by Nussbaum.

#### 4. Listing Collective Combined Capabilities

The second challenge has to do with Nussbaum's list of *combined capabilities*. In this regard, a key question is: are collective combined capabilities part of this list, or a specific list for collective combined capabilities is to be provided?

According to the latest version of Nussbaum's list, the *combined capabilities* are: (1) Life; (2) Bodily health; (3) Bodily integrity; (4) Senses, imagination and thought; (5) Emotions; (6) Practical reason; (7) Affiliation; (8) Other species; (9) Play; and (10) Political and material control over one's environment (Nussbaum, 2000:78-80; 2003:41-42; 2006:76-78; 2011:33-34).

As examined in the above paragraph, the ontological difference between combined capabilities, that undoubtedly fall within the individual framework, and collective combined capabilities prevents from simply adding those latter in the same list. It follows that a separate, additional, specific list for collective combined capabilities is to be provided. The resulting separated list of *collective combined capabilities* – i.e. collective capabilities combined with suitable external conditions for the exercise of the function – can be therefore outlined as follows:

**1. Resistant Capability:** collective ability to resist to structural injustices, such as top-down decisions imposed by authorities upon groups.

**2. Resilient Capability:** collective ability to react constructively to structural injustices, including collective actions taken by groups aimed at expanding their freedoms.

The provided list is deliberately left vague in its content in order to promote, as much as possible, a community-based definition of concrete actions realizing collective capabilities.

In doing so, each group using this *horizontal instrument* is more likely to determine which sort of self-help initiatives, adaptive strategies and, more generally, collective agency are necessary for functioning in their own communities.

#### 5. How this extension will affect Nussbaum's version of the CA

The third challenge of the paper moves into question of how and to what extent this extension (an additional list of *collective combined capabilities*) affects Nussbaum's version of the capabilities approach.

In order to answer the question, two lines of arguments are examined as follows:

1) the coherence of the extension with the CA's individual framework and the importance of ensuring affiliation;

2) the relationship between the concept of threshold level and *collective capabilities*.

(1) A first general question is whether this attempt of extension within the CA's individualistic framework is more likely to push beyond Nussbaum's theory, rather than simply adjusts/extends it.

In this regard, a first reason for caution might be that acknowledging the ontological difference between individual and collective capabilities could push beyond the individualistic boundaries of the CA. In answering this objection, it is worth noting that the essential precondition for exercising the collective capabilities ultimately relies on the individual capacity of affiliation. The seventh capability listed by Nussbaum, indeed, refers to the ability of the individual to "engage in various forms of social interaction" (Nussbaum, 2000: 79). Therefore, constituting forms of affiliation and ensuring the related freedom of assembly and political speech are definitely required in order to develop any collective capability.

The extension at stake differs from the communitarianism and more generally from those who want to establish a hierarchy between individuals and collectivity. Whether the priority falls on individuals or on collectivity, the idea of collectivity proposed by this extension is mainly grounded on the relationship between them. Such relationship radically diverges from the traditional contractualism like the one of Hobbes, who conceives the collectivity in terms of subtraction. Indeed, while according to Hobbes all individuals join the society by ceding rights to a sovereign authority for the sake of protection, I conceive the relationship between collectivity and individuals in terms of addition. An individual who decides to join the collectivity to form a collective subject expands his capabilities. The democratic empowerment is therefore achieved by ensuring individuals have the capacity to join a group (affiliation) for the specific goal of getting above the capability threshold. In doing this, individuals expand their capabilities and achieve together what none can achieve alone. In this view, individuals do not forgo to achieve their ends in the wider interests of society<sup>16</sup>. Rather, individuals expand their capabilities precisely because of the restricted scope expressed by the given goal of the collective subject of which they form part.

With regard to the process of pursuing the common goal, unlike communitarians for whom in a community the process itself is seen by members of the group as valuable in itself, my conception is rather more in line with that of the association. In this second case, such process is viewed only as instrumental for attaining the restricted goal for which the individuals have been engaged. It has no value in itself.

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<sup>16</sup> Not surprisingly, this idea also differs from more recent experiences of totalitarian regimes where human rights were systematically constrained/violated in the name of the Community's main interest.

In view of these considerations, this first criticism is easily rebutted on the ground that:

- at the core of the collective capabilities there is the individual capability of affiliation;
- the idea of collectivity, as it emerges from this extension, does not imply any hierarchy between individuals and collectivity, but a relationship conceived in terms of addition, rather than subtraction.

As a result, this extension does not push beyond the CA's individualistic framework since the individual is still considered the reference point.

2) The second line of reasoning investigates the relationship between the threshold level and collective capabilities.

As discussed above, due to the limited capacity of governments to ensure the threshold level of basic rights for all citizens, a *horizontal instrument* to groups who (may) fall below the threshold level is to be provided. The primary aim of introducing the collective capabilities has been indeed to allow any group affected by a capability deprivation to organize themselves collectively for getting above the capability threshold.

In this view, my extension will affect Nussbaum's version of the capabilities approach since the social goal, i.e. getting above the capability threshold, can be also collectively achieved by any groups affected by a capability deprivation.

Instead of falling only within the State's obligations or prerogatives, the social goal can be pursued by the *horizontal instrument* provided to groups (collective capabilities). In doing this, such *horizontal instrument* may strengthen the principle of subsidiarity by a bottom-up pursuing of the social goal.

As a result, a minimally just State must work to demand that threshold level of capability be ensured for *all groups living under the threshold*, to be able to convert their *collective capabilities into collective combined capabilities* (adapted by Fennell, 2013:168).

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has analysed the need to include a collective dimension of capabilities within the CA to empower democracy. The CA has been indeed criticized for being too individualistic as it is overly focused on 'individual' capabilities. The article has then adopted the Nussbaum's version of the CA as a conceptual framework for adding a list

of collective combined capabilities, due to its focus on capabilities categorization and its list of combined capabilities.

Given the limited capacity of governments to ensure the threshold level of basic rights for all citizens, the paper has provided an expanded reading of the CA by providing a categorization of the collective capabilities based on the ontological distinction between individual and collective capabilities. The notion of collective subject has been therefore developed to support this argumentation, so as to introduce 'the first person plural' in addition to and to complement 'the first person singular'.

The idea of collectivity, as it emerges from this extension, is indeed the expression of a sort of transition from 'the philosophy of the self' to 'the philosophy of the us', where 'us' is limited in the scope by both the notion of collective subject and the end. As for the scope, it has been clarified that any group subjected to capability deprivation constitute a collective subject entitled to exercise the collective capabilities. As for the end, what is required to constitute a collective subject is the social goal of getting affected groups above the capability threshold. In doing this, the relationship between individuals and collectivity may be well conceived in terms of addition, rather than subtraction. In fact, individuals do not join the collectivity by ceding even partly their rights to a sovereign authority, but they expand their capabilities by achieving together what none can achieve alone.

The paper has also demonstrated the coherence of such extension with the CA's individual framework on the ground that the collective capabilities ultimately depend upon the individual capacity of affiliation. Accordingly, the individual remains the main reference point.

Finally, the paper has shown how the collective capabilities represent a valuable *horizontal instrument* for removing forms of un-freedoms and expanding citizens' capabilities. The principle of subsidiarity might be well strengthened by such bottom-up pursuing of the social goal: getting groups subjected to capability deprivation above the capability threshold. A purposely outstanding issue in the paper is that of the collective responsibility.

Providing such *horizontal instrument*, such as the collective capabilities, in order to compensate governments' incapacities to achieve the social goal may well imply to acknowledge collective responsibilities: collective obligations are to be met in order to secure those new (expanded) substantial freedoms. The issue seems then worth exploring, and indeed one purpose of my contribution is to encourage future research on this topic.

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#### **AUTHOR'S INFORMATION:**

**Francesca Rosignoli** is Postdoc fellow at the Department of Political Science at Stockholm University, doing a research project on Environmental Justice and Climate Refugees.

In 2016, I obtained a Ph.D. in Public Law, Comparative and International at the University of Rome "La Sapienza" with a doctoral dissertation titled "A Theory of Justice for Environmental Justice. A Comparative Analysis between Italy and Germany". The dissertation was written in English after almost two years of research activities at the Environmental Policy Research Centre (FFU) at the Freie Universität Berlin (2014-2016).

I studied and did research activities abroad in Denmark (Aarhus University), Germany (Freie Universität Berlin), and Sweden (Stockholm University).