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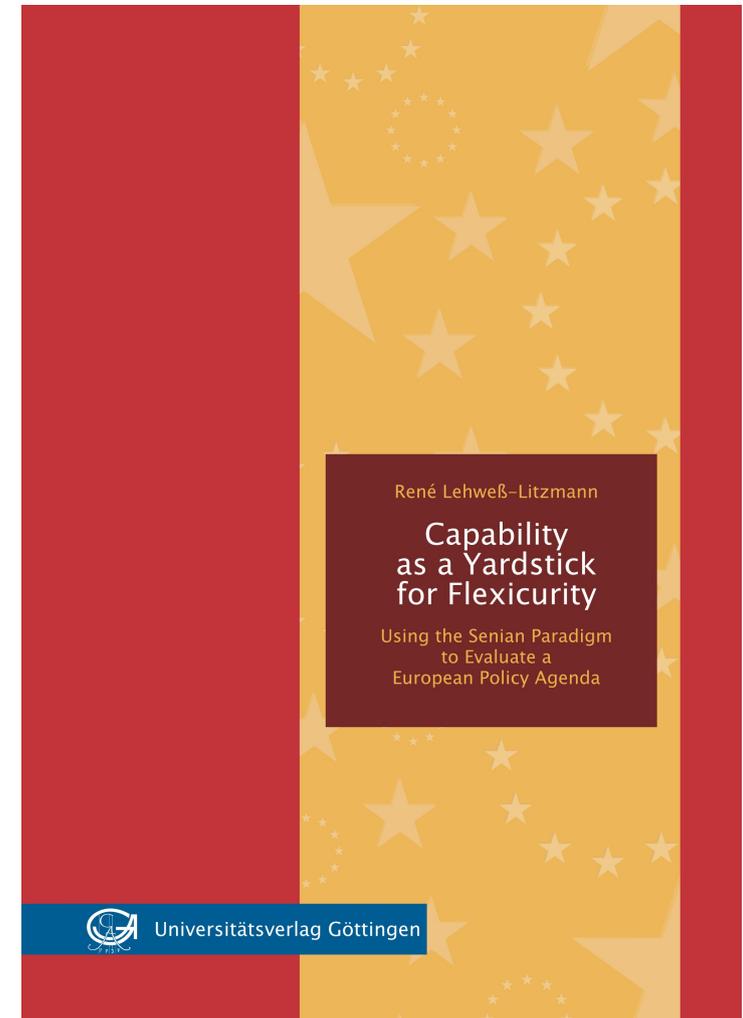
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Capability as a yardstick for flexicurity: selected thoughts for ‘capability-insiders’

Presentation at the HDCA annual conference
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Overview

- Talk is based on recent book in the context of a dissertation project:
 - Analysing the use of capability as a yardstick for policy
 - at the example of flexicurity, a European policy agenda.
- The two parts of the present talk:
 - 1) Why confront the flexicurity agenda with the CA?
 - 2) Advantages and disadvantages of applying the CA as a yardstick for policy.



Section 1:

- Flexicurity meets the CA

What is flexicurity?

- According to the EU Commission (2007), flexicurity is “an **integrated strategy** to enhance, at the same time, flexibility and security in the labour-market” in order to “maintain and improve competitiveness whilst reinforcing the European social model”.
- Concretely, the Commission assumes that: More **flexibility and security** in the labour-market are **needed and wanted** by both **employers and workers** and can **simultaneously** be achieved by appropriate **regulation**.
- Auer/Gazier (2008) flexicurity is a “**European policy agenda**”.

Why confront flexicurity with the capability-approach?

- **Complementariness:** Flexicurity has socio-political impact, but lacks
 - a **vision** for society (while CA speaks about real freedom)
 - a **normative reference** (while CA features a democratic process)
 - an adequate **monitoring instrument** (the CA being a paradigm for well-being measurement).
- **Compatibility:** Both flexicurity and CA are responses to the high degree of **contingency** in modern societies.
 - Flexicurity aims at multiplying feasible **options** to brace market actors for different situations.
 - CA aims at extending **freedom** (= options + individual control)
 - CA proposes a metric for well-being in situations marked by heterogeneity, a metric which allows discerning between **diversity** and **inequity** (imposed difference): Measuring counter-factual facts.

Section 2:

- Which benefit comes from applying the CA as a yardstick in the field of labour-market and social policy?
- Which obstacles are there?

The CA can be fruitful in policy analysis because it...

- ...focuses on well-being of *individual persons*, instead of goals which are only loosely connected to it
- ...heeds the *counter-factual* dimension, and thus allows analysing whether observed differences are a result of choice or of constraint
- ...integrates the *individual* and the *societal* perspective both at a methodological and a normative level
- ...makes it clear that there is always a *valuation exercise* involved exploring well-being
- ...preserves a high degree of *openness*, as normative sources are mostly external
- ...is a *realistic* and *pragmatic* approach: interested in policy alternatives which *both* yield better outcomes *and* could get real

Obstacles to using the CA as yardstick: normative gap

- Strong emphasis on **public discussion (PD)** as a normative source... for policy, and for research.
- But where can PD be observed? Which features define **legitimate** PD? The CA does not specify this properly.
- The researcher is often left in the dark about which functionings people really value and have reason to value in a given society.
- In consequence, the very criteria which should be used for policy evaluation stay under-determined.
- Remedy?
 - Proxy PD by survey outcomes (Eurobarometer,...)?
 - Organise focus groups? (Sampling?)
 - Define criteria for legitimate PD (who should deliberate? how should deliberation be organised?)

Obstacles to using the CA: counter-factuality

- Two empirical intricacies of measuring freedom: **Unobservability**: lack of data in surveys, respondent's lack of information on their options (...) and the '**framing of freedom**': What to include in the equation?
- Example: Is somebody free to go on holiday if it implies spending all his money? → Up to which *cost* can an option be considered as *existing* and *real*?
- Example: Working in part-time because of dependent children: Voluntary decision? → Saying that a certain decision is *voluntary* always requires **limiting** the observed horizon, thus considering part of the circumstances as *given*.
- The problem lies in legitimately fixing the informational base: To what degree do we have to take opportunity-cost into account? What are we allowed to treat as given?

Obstacles to using the CA: strong emphasis on freedom

- **Freedom** is a **positive norm** ‘par excellence’ for the CA. But it can be difficult to handle:
- Richard Sennett (2000) shows for contemporary ‘**flexible capitalism**’: it is not only a lack of freedom which can make people suffer, but also the inability to deal with a multitude of options. People feel obliged to keep moving in order to ‘be someone’. But what is at stake here is their very identity, threatened by the constant obligation to reinvent themselves, to make the best of their freedom.
→ “Corrosion of character”
- Robert Castel (2009): ‘**disaffiliation**’ of ‘**hypermodern**’ individuals: so well equipped that they can afford to completely turn to themselves and their subjectivity: they lose contact with society and suffer psychologically.
→ Their problem is *not* a lack of freedom, but an **overdose**.

Conclusion

Conclusion: do I recommend the CA for policy analysis?

- Independently of the CA's benefits and drawbacks for research: choosing an informational base for policy evaluation is a substantial normative decision, which *in principle* devolves to a democratic process.
- *In practice*, it is not realistic that this decision is made outside of research. Research should thus analyse the *consequences* of each choice of yardstick and propose their work to public discussion.
- Thus, the research and the book presented here just spell out what it would mean to adopt the capability-yardstick. (But, this can be done only in a limited way, because – as was insisted upon – there is no readily-observable result of public discussion.)
- Given the many points of reflection raised: the CA can *at least* be recommended as a sensitizing concept.

Thank you
for listening.

- For more detail...
(open access: [download](#))

