

MINIMAL INCOME AS BASIC CONDITION FOR AUTONOMY

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ABSTRACT – In this paper I shall deal with the question of whether a State-granted minimal income (which is not the same as a basic income) is a necessary condition in order for individuals (1) to attain a basic level of autonomy; and (2) to develop capabilities that allow them to improve the quality of their life. As a theoretical basis for my analysis I shall use Honneth's theory of recognition, Sen's capability approach (also in the version offered by Nussbaum), and Simmel's concept of independency as developed in his *Philosophy of Money*. A minimal income aims at guaranteeing not only the survival of the extremely poor (this could also be achieved by emergency programs), but also – in cooperation with other State programs such as education, medical and legal assistance etc – at enabling these individuals to be more independent from their social environment, where dependence often constitutes a strong obstacle to the development of their autonomy. The social and political inclusion of millions of people, both in threshold countries and in poor countries, depends upon the existence of such programs.

KEYWORDS – Recognition. Autonomy. Honneth. Sen. Simmel. Capabilities. Minimal income.

RESUMO – O artigo investiga se uma renda mínima assegurada pelo Estado (que não é a mesma coisa que uma renda básica) é uma condição necessária para que indivíduos (1) atinjam um patamar básico de autonomia e (2) desenvolvam “capabilidades” que os permitam incrementar a sua qualidade de vida. Como embasamento teórico para a minha análise, utilizarei a teoria do reconhecimento de Honneth, a abordagem de “capabilidade” de Sen (também na versão oferecida por Nussbaum) e o conceito de independência de Simmel, como foi desenvolvido em sua *Filosofia do Dinheiro*. A renda mínima visa garantir não só a sobrevivência dos extremamente pobres (isso também poderia ser realizado através de programas emergenciais), mas também – em cooperação com outros programas do Estado, tais como educação, assistência médica e jurídica etc – permitir que esses indivíduos sejam mais independentes do seu ambiente social, onde muitas vezes a dependência constitui um forte obstáculo ao desenvolvimento da sua autonomia. A inclusão social e política de milhões de pessoas, tanto em países em desenvolvimento quanto nos países pobres, depende da existência de tais programas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE – Autonomia. Capabilidades. Honneth. Reconhecimento. Renda mínima. Sen. Simmel.

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Introduction

In his *Struggle for Recognition* Axel Honneth aims – among other things – at actualizing some fundamental intuitions that Hegel exposed in his writings from the Jena period (HONNETH 1992). Honneth's intention is to “validate”, so to speak, Hegel's conclusions by using the findings of empirical sciences such as Mead's social psychology or Winnecott's psychoanalytical theory. In this context, I'm not interested in valuating the plausibility of this attempt and its results (which, by the way, I consider quite convincing). Rather, it is my intent to focus on a question that in my opinion is not developed enough both in Hegel's and in Honneth's account of the formation of the individual conscience through recognition. I'm referring to the question of the rising of an autonomous subject in a social dimension, which is on the one hand wider than the familiar one of the love relationship between mother and child (the first dimension in the formation of identity considered by Hegel and Honneth), and which on the other hand has not directly to do with the legal dimension of the mutual recognition of individual rights (the second dimension introduced by our authors). In other word, I'll try to explore the open space lying between the recognition forms of *Liebe* and *Recht* in order to identify a further form of recognition, which is as essential as the mentioned ones and which concerns what Amartya Sen calls “capabilities”, Philippe van Parijs calls “real freedom” and Georg Simmel calls “independency”, and which I shall call simply “basic autonomy” (see SEN, 1992 and 1999; VAN PARIJS, 1995 and SIMMEL, 1900). Finally, I shall defend the necessity of a minimal basic income as essential condition for developing this kind of autonomy.

1. Love, Right, and the Missing Link

In the Jena manuscripts Hegel identifies three forms of recognition, which are the basis for the development of the individual identity of any subject: love, right, and solidarity. Through them individuals develop different forms of self-consciousness – forms that Honneth, in his reading of Hegel, calls respectively: self-confidence (*Selbstvertrauen*), self-respect (*Selbstachtung*) and self-esteem (*Selbstschätzung*) (HONNETH, 1992, 148 ff.).

According to Honneth, love relates to the fact that we are beings with both physical and emotional necessities. Through the love of others (primarily of our mother, later of our friends and lovers) we develop self-confidence. The corresponding forms of disrespect are violence and abuse, which threaten our physical and psychological integrity. The recognition of legal rights refers to us as morally responsible subjects and

endows us with self-respect. The corresponding forms of disrespect are legal discrimination and deprivation of rights, which threaten our social integrity. Finally, solidarity refers to us as members of a community in which our capacities and qualities are recognized and appreciated. This gives rise to our self-esteem. Humiliation and offense (the corresponding forms of disrespect) violate our honor and dignity.

While I agree with Honneth's Hegelian stance according to which human beings generally develop their identities in an inter-subjective context and particularly in a 'healthy' self-consciousness through recognition by others, I have the impression that in his description of the different forms of recognition (love, right, and solidarity) and of "practical self-relation" (self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem) Honneth is leaving something out. More precisely, he (and Hegel before him) is jumping from the intimate sphere of love relations (with the mother, with the family, with friends and lovers) to the public sphere of legal relations (with other rights bearers, with the State etc.). I wonder whether there is an intermediate sphere, in which individuals develop what I shall call in quite generic way autonomy. This sphere has to do with the third sphere considered by Honneth, that is, the sphere of broad social relations (broad in a double sense: they go further than more intimate ones such as family, friendship etc., and they are more generic than merely legal relations). The corresponding form of recognition, solidarity, is conceived by Honneth as a form of actively caring for the self-development of others (HONNETH, 1992, 210) and seems to presuppose that every individual depends essentially from the others' help in order to develop her qualities, even if Honneth does not explicitly defend this position. This is precisely what I shall do, and I shall try to defend the idea that the formation of autonomy depends not only on love, on legal rights and on solidarity-as-(individual)-care, but also and essentially on certain social and economic conditions which may vary very much in different societies.

I shall start offering a broad definition of individual autonomy and I shall later try to refine this definition through reference to the different ways in which individuals can reach autonomy.

2. Autonomy and its conditions

We attribute autonomy to an individual if she is able to act according to a personal plan of good life (a plan that may correspond to or be inspired by existing models of good life) and to consider herself and the others as being able to establish mutual relations of moral and legal obligation (in other words, if she is able to see herself and the others as bearers of

rights and duties).¹ This definition refers to what we could call a minimal level of autonomy, since the latter can be developed at several degrees: an individual becomes the more autonomous (1) the more she defines her life plan independently from the models offered by her environment (both the narrower one – family, friends, restricted community – and the wider one – her culture, her religious creed etc.), and (2) the more she defines rights and duties (for herself and for others) based on increasingly universal principles as opposed to merely local or parochial principles (such as the ones she learnt from her family or church or community). While in the first case reaching a greater autonomy is relevant only for the individual herself, since it is a matter of widening her chances of good life, in the second case it is relevant also for the others. Therefore, an individual who is able to imagine for herself life models, which her next environment condemns morally (for instance, a woman coming from a very chauvinistic and patriarchal family who decides to live alone, even at the price of moving to another city or to a far place) increases her chances of living a good life; an individual who starts to see and treat other individuals in a different manner than her environment does and who, therefore, recognizes them more moral rights (for instance, a brother of the afore-mentioned woman who starts to consider his sister's life model as morally legitimate and who starts to attribute to women – in general – rights that the other family members still deny based on their chauvinistic views) contributes to the creation of a more favorable environment for those individuals and their life plans. From this point of view, the development of a greater autonomy could be considered the object of a moral obligation, but I shall not deepen this point.

Now, the question is: how can individuals develop this kind of autonomy and deepen or widen it? In order to answer to this question, one should try firstly to specify more the very notion of autonomy. To this goal I shall turn to Philippe van Parijs' concept of real freedom and to Amartya Sen's capability approach.

¹ In a more traditional way, Pauer-Studer defines autonomy as the capacity of assuming a reflective, critical attitude towards our spontaneous individual desires. "Being autonomous means choosing from a set of options those for which there are good reasons from the point of view of our own life plan" (PAUER-STUDER, 2000, 13). According to her, one can identify several kinds of autonomy, since the latter "becomes concrete in specific way in different spheres of human action". In order for individuals to develop other forms of autonomy, it is necessary that they are able to live their conception of good as they define it (*ibid.*, 16). What I try to defend here is the idea that the very definition of a conception of good is an expression of autonomy, even if the individual still has no reflective, critical attitude towards it. Analogous definitions of autonomy can be found in a plurality of authors, starting with John Rawls.

According to van Parijs, real freedom (as he calls it) incorporates three components: security, self-ownership and opportunity, “in contrast to formal freedom, which only incorporates the first two” (VAN PARIJS, 1995, 22 s.). In order to be really free, an individual should not only have security and own herself, but also have opportunities to develop and realize a life plan – opportunities that van Parijs does not define exclusively as external or objective, but also as internal or subjective abilities and capacities to do something.

Thus the conception of real freedom presented above does not merely refuse to confine freedom-restricting obstacles to coercion – whether defined as self-ownership-violation or as right-violation. It also refuses to confine them to obstacles external to the person concerned, or to obstacles that are produced deliberately, indeed produced at all and/or removable by other human beings. (VAN PARIJS, 1995, 23)

Further: “Personal abilities or talents are internal to the person, and it is therefore correct to say that it is possible for freedom, on this conception, to be restricted by internal as well as external obstacles” (VAN PARIJS, 1995, 24). Of course, this does not mean that every missing ability or capacity should be seen as a violation of our freedom: the fact that I cannot fly or become – say – a top soccer player does not impede that I develop and realize an alternative plan of good life; not being able to read and write, on the other hand, can have a tremendous negative impact on my chances of living a good life.²

We should, therefore, define freedom both with respect to the external, objective obstacles to it (as traditional theories do) *and* to the subjective abilities and capacities that allow individuals to develop and to follow their own vision of good life. The question is: how do individuals reach real freedom?

Amartya Sen’s capability approach can represent a way of answering this question. Sen distinguishes notably between functioning and capability. An example of functioning is riding a bicycle. Riding a bicycle means to be engaged in an activity (in this case through an instrument: the bicycle). Now, the interesting question is why the cyclist is riding. She can be using a bicycle to ride to work or just to her leisure. In the first case, she can be riding because she doesn’t want to use her car (out

² In order to justify his idea of a general basic income, van Parijs insists on the impact of richness and income on our life plans: “Via our earning power, our personal abilities massively affect what we shall be permitted to acquire. Conversely, what I can – over more than the very short term – is systematically affected by what I may. Whether or not I shall stop limping depends on whether or not my wallet or the waiting list will allow me to have the operation I require” (VAN PARIJS, 1995, 24).

of ecological consciousness or in order to avoid traffic), or because she doesn't have a car at all; in the latter case, she can be riding because there is no public transport, or because there is one, but our cyclist can't afford a bus, subway or train ticket. In sum: a rich, ecologically-conscious manager pedaling to her workplace and a poor worker riding to a factory in a Third World country share the same functioning (riding a bike), but from very different perspectives. This calls in cause the idea of freedom to function, that is, the range of real options that a person has with regard to "functionings" (SEN, 1992, 56 ff.). In this sense, the rich manager has more freedom than the poor worker, since she can choose among a wider range of options (of "functionings"). Considering that certain functionings (like e. g. physical health) have an intrinsic, independent value, one can say that an individual having a wider range of options of functionings can be said to attain an higher level of freedom and of well-being at the same time.³

Now, in order to be reached, some functioning involves a complex set of conditions that have to be met. Going back to the above-mentioned example, a woman moving to a city in order to escape the narrow world of her patriarchal family is exercising a functioning that involves several aspects beyond the physical transfer to another place: she is getting free from certain constraints while at the same time losing certain securities; she may widen her choices of having a good life or condemn herself to a hard life of sacrifice and to a poorly paid job (particularly if she is illiterate – as it is likely for a woman coming from her environment). The result of her move to the city depends very much on external circumstances as well as on her *capabilities*.

This word results from the fusion of capacity and ability. According to Sen we cannot think of a capability as something isolated, but we should always consider it with reference to a set of capabilities. A person always has a set of capabilities which allow her to exercise a certain set of functionings, but there is no necessary relation between these and those: two individuals can have the same set of capabilities and choose different sets of functionings, or – on the contrary – have different capabilities and share certain functionings (as in the example of the manager and the worker both riding a bike). In Sen's vision, capabilities are therefore possibilities, or opportunities of functioning. They are no mere capacities: saying that someone has the capability of moving freely to another city

³ Martha Nussbaum stretches out that sometimes actual functioning does not only possess intrinsic value, but also represents the basis for exercising our free choice: this is the case, for instance, of reading, since only those who can read at some level are "able to decide to improve or abandon her reading" (CROCKER, 1995, 157).

does not refer to her capacity of moving (or in her being able to move), but to the actual options she has of really doing it. In this sense, capabilities refer not only to capacities and abilities, but also to states of mind, to other subjective states (like being healthy, being illiterate etc.) and to external circumstances: therefore, they can only be thought of as a set, not as isolated qualities. Has the woman of our example really the option of moving to a city in order to get a better life? Sen would invite us to consider whether this is an actual option for her considering everything that such an action would imply: for instance, abandoning the place where she was born; her family; a net of relationships and affections; a world whose symbolic code and whose values she understands and – at least partially – shares; a certain climate and lifestyle she is used to, while at the same time going to an unknown and hostile place, where she will be alone (at least at the beginning), and marginalized for coming from a poor environment and for being unable to understand the codes of the big city etc. It is not enough, therefore, to say that a person has the capability to choose a certain functioning (in this case, emigrating), if we do not consider all the other capabilities involved in this choice.

Going back to van Parijs's definition of real freedom, we could say that an individual has to develop a set of capabilities in order to be really free (in order to have what van Parijs calls opportunity, along with security and self-ownership). Those capabilities will allow her to exercise certain functioning – better: to be actually able to choose among different options of functioning. In order to escape from her environment and to move to a better one, the woman from our example must have a set of capabilities, which involves – among others – the courage of leaving the known for the unknown, the strength for facing the difficulties connected to the new environment, a good amount of self-confidence, etc. The presence or absence of some capabilities from the set will influence more or less heavily her chances of success in the city; her literacy, her physical and psychological state, her ability in understanding the new codes etc., are good example of such capabilities.

The autonomy of an individual can be seen, therefore, as depending on a set of capabilities, which allows an individual to choose among a range of options concerning functionings – a range whose width depends from the capabilities themselves. In other words, autonomy depends on the capabilities an individual develops in the course of her life. Now, individuals develop their capabilities inter-subjectively, that is, in a social environment; but capabilities are neither necessarily the result of love, nor always the object of rights. It seems to me that a somehow not-yet-explored territory stretches between recognition through love and recognition through right; between self-confidence and self-respect

– a territory in which a form of autonomy arises, which is neither legal (although it may be guaranteed through legal means), nor political, nor social, nor economical (not even moral, at least not in the strong Kantian or Kohlbergian sense), but a more basic one. Of course there is no great leap forward from the formation of a self-confident subject (via recognition through love) to the formation of a bearer of right endowed with self-respect (via legal recognition). The process through which individuals form their identity and develop autonomy is a complex and continuous one. I agree with Honneth on the necessity of turning to the results of empirical sciences, more specifically to social psychology, in order to grasp this process. In the next part of this paper I shall use the theory of the interrelation between character structure and institution developed by Gerth and Mills, but this classical theory represents rather a starting point for further inquiries and I am aware that there are other, possibly better theories to explain how individual identity and autonomy arises (for a general vision see MARTUCCELLI, 2005). In other words: For my argument to work, it is sufficient that one accepts the idea that personal identity is (at least in part, if not completely) the result of inter-subjective relations and processes. Therefore, Gerth and Mills's theory is used here merely as an example to illustrate the consequences that theories of the formation of individual identity and autonomy via social interplay may have on the theories of autonomy as real freedom (van Parijs) and as freedom to function (Sen).

3. The social formation of autonomy

Gerth and Mills' theory can be best summarized by the following assertion: "Man as a person is an historical creation, and can most readily be understood in terms of the roles which he enacts and incorporates.⁴ These roles are limited by the kind of social institutions in which he happens to be born and in which he matures into an adult" (GERTH and MILLS, 1964, 11). In other words: an individual's capabilities are determined by her social environments, mostly through her position in it and through the roles she is called to assume in it.⁵ According to our authors, an individual forms a self-image through internalization of the image that significant others (or a generalized other) have of her, as well as through the fact that she is meeting the expectations that these

⁴ This idea will be at the center of Erving Goffman's theory of the "dramatic" aspect of everyday life (see GOFFMAN, 1959).

⁵ A central role in this process is played by language, as Gerth and Mills acknowledge and as Hegel had already observed in his Jena manuscripts (GERTH and MILLS, 1964, 12, note 10 and, more extensively, 81 ff.).

significant others have towards her with respect to certain roles, which are defined socially. In order to be recognized as a full member of a group (or of society at large), the individual has to meet role-bound expectations. Her education as a child and as an adolescent or young adult should give her the characteristics that should guarantee her success in acting according to her role. In other words, it will offer her certain capabilities for what her environment regards as a socially (or morally, or religiously) desirable functioning. In relatively closed, static environments such as a patriarchal family from the *sertão*, for instance, the role an individual is called to assume is clearly defined and the whole familial education is aimed at creating a person who is up to her or his role (cf. GERTH and MILLS, 1964, 91 ff.). Such an individual may gain a conspicuous level of self-confidence and self-esteem, but could nevertheless lack autonomy in the above-mentioned sense of the capacity of widening the range of options, among which she can choose her life plan. To this end, she should develop capabilities which depend on conditions that may not be immediately available in her next social environment. The range of such conditions may vary from her having access to alternative models to the patriarchal family, (for instance, through personal contact with more emancipated individuals or even through TV)⁶ to her having access to public education, to the existence of policies specifically aimed at giving new chances to individuals living in poor regions, etc. The last part of my paper refers precisely to the material basis for autonomy as a possible object of public policies.

4. The material basis for autonomy

Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum have insisted very much on the material basis for the developing of capabilities, and thus, on the necessity of individuals to have access to the material goods connected to this process. Analogous positions can be found in Rawls and in other theories of social justice. The basic idea is: When these goods are not easily available, individuals should be helped to get them. The point is: Which material goods are to be handed out, how, and by whom? Since they involve different levels of freedom/autonomy, there are many answers to these questions, and in this context I shall offer a simple one concerning the most basic level: The state should guarantee to everybody an unconditional minimal income in order that everyone may attain basic autonomy, i.e., the set of fundamental capabilities that allows her or

⁶ I don't need to mention the relevance of some Brazilian *novelas* for contributing to the social acceptance of heterodox life styles: any average Brazilian knows this very well.

him to think of her/himself as a minimally autonomous person. This has nothing to do with guaranteeing a basic income (an idea defended by van Parijs and others), although it can be seen as a first step towards it. The main difference consists in the absence of any conditionality (while basic income can be bound to some idea of social accountability according to which individuals ought to return something to the community in some form).

Every solution other than distributing such an income could be labeled as charity (what Brazilians call *assistencialismo*) and as paternalistic. Of course, there may be emergency situations in which it could be necessary to distribute material goods such as food, shelter etc. But beyond this particular case, the state intervention should be as much impersonal as possible. Giving money to individuals aims exactly at emancipating them not only from misery or poverty, but also from a social environment that can be a further cause of suffering. Going back to our example: a woman depending either on her patriarchal family or on her own labor force (which shall condemn her to low-wage jobs because of her lack of qualifications) has no real option of moving out of her environment and looking for a place in which she can develop her autonomy. On the other side, if she can count on a monthly minimal income, this fact could help her to dare the big step of moving out from her usual environment – even if to this end other causes are necessary too. Of course, I'm not claiming that such an income should or could replace a decent public education, full legal protection and public legal counseling etc. What I'm claiming is that money is a necessary element of the material basis for autonomy (or for the “developing of capabilities”, or for “real freedom” – call it as you want).

This is not a particularly new idea. For instance, in his *Philosophy of Money* Georg Simmel pointed out the fact that the rising of the idea of autonomy and of autonomous individuals is a specific phenomenon of Western modernity connected to the rising first of a mercantilist, later of a capitalist system. Particularly useful for us is his distinction between “not dependency” and “independency”. Individuals in a pre-modern society have obligations characterized by personal bounds (e.g. the vassal to his lord) and are caught in a net of personal relationships and commitments, which lets them practically no freedom at all. In the mercantilist and capitalist society, those obligations become depersonalized: instead of owing working hours to his lord, the vassal pays a tax; in this way, the relationship becomes less personal and the lord appears to him not as the real person he is, but as an impersonal instance to which certain taxes are due. This makes individuals independent from each other in the sense that their mutual dependency (which of course still exists) is connected not to a net of inescapable personal relationships, rather to a net of impersonal relationships, i.e., a net of relationships to individuals

who show to us only a side of themselves: they are clients, competitors, suppliers etc. Our relationship to them is a monetary one: we pay them or get paid by them for certain services. Through money we buy our independency from any personal bound or commitment, even if we are still dependent on others for our life. *Not dependent* is only “the isolated dweller in the German or in the American forests” (SIMMEL, 1900, 318; my transl.); the average individual, living with others, does depend on them, but can be *independent* from them in the above-mentioned sense: she does not need to be caught in a net of personal commitments and can, therefore, start planning her own idea of good life independently of the (positive or negative) opinion of people she has unavoidably to connect to in order to satisfy her basic necessities – in other words: independently from the role her next social environment imposes on her. She becomes free of assuming other roles (but not free from assuming roles at all, since this would be impossible).

I would like to stretch that so-thought autonomy is not a quality of the individual as such, as it is the case, say, of her complexion, physical strength and so on. It rather depends on the relations this individual establishes with others. As Simmel puts it: “Individual freedom is no internal quality of an isolated subject, but a phenomenon of correlation which loses its meaning when there is no counter-part” (SIMMEL, 1900, 318, my transl.). Material independency (guaranteed through money) is an essential element of it and should be therefore considered a basic good that could be the object of public policies aimed at creating autonomous citizens.

The material basis that allows individuals to develop their autonomy can be in a second moment thought of as an object of rights: redistribution becomes then a matter of recognition (not just a separate, even if equally important matter),⁷ since through redistribution the individual is able to obtain a higher level of autonomy, which – as we have seen – is thinkable only in inter-subjective terms. Put it in another way: the legal guarantee of a basic income constitutes a form of social recognition and can be considered as a peculiar form of solidarity along with the one individuated by Honneth (solidarity-as-individual-care). It expresses the solidarity of a political community towards its members, that is, it is expression of an institutional (not individual) care for their autonomy. A policy of universal minimal income would represent the unification of two forms of recognition (the legal and the social one), and it would make possible at the same time that individuals develop a stronger autonomy from their next environment. On the other side, other conditions should be met in

⁷ This is Nancy Fraser’s position in her dialogue with Honneth (see FRASER and HONNETH 2003)

order that individuals reach firstly basic autonomy and develop secondly a higher level of it – conditions that may depend on the existence of public policies, but which are also connected to the social and cultural environment and to the possibility of changing this environment. In other words: while a universal minimal income is a necessary element of basic autonomy, it might not be a sufficient one and, certainly, it is not sufficient for a higher level of autonomy. Whether a higher autonomy can be reached, and at which extent, is a question that can only be answered considering the specific situation in which individuals live: their next environment, social institutions, the state etc. In this sense, if we consider the specific situation of poor women and men in Brazil, we shall have to take into account a number of conditions under which they can gain autonomy. Only having identified such conditions shall we be able to identify the policies, which could lead them to develop autonomy. From this point of view, Honneth is right in pointing out the necessity that political theory cooperates with other disciplines such as sociology or psychology, if it aims at being relevant for political praxis and if it doesn't want to not be a mere intellectual exercise.

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