Research Article

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Adversarial Democracy and the Flattening of Choice: A Marcusian Analysis of Sen's Capability Theory's Reliance Upon Universal Democracy as a Means for Overcoming Inequality

https://doi.org/10.1515/opphil-2022-0222
received August 17, 2022; accepted October 11, 2022

Abstract: This article critically examines the competitive, adversarial nature of the Western neoliberal style of democracy. Specifically, this article focuses on Amartya Sen's notion of a "universal democracy" as a means of addressing socio-economic inequalities through Sen's capability approach. Sen's capability theory has become an acclaimed and widely used theory to evaluate and understand development and inequalities. However, we employ a distinctive critique by engaging Amartya Sen through Herbert Marcuse's analysis of one dimensionality and the adversarial nature of Western democracy. We further highlight how contemporary neoliberal society employ a particular, adversarial form of public participation. Through this, we underline the various neoliberal problemata, such as Western idealism, political passivity, and a "flattening of choice," within contemporary democracies and locate how their competitive, winner-take-all nature has become essential to contemporary, Western democratic models. Consequently, we argue that democracy, as a functional concept and form of public engagement, should be fundamentally re-examined in order to address inequalities.

Keywords: Amartya Sen, Herbert Marcuse, neoliberalism, democracy, one dimensionality

1 Introduction

This article argues that the adversarial, "winner-take all" nature of Western-style democracy is iniquitous when addressing economic and social inequality. The nature of Western-style democracy fails to consider the concerns and issues of its constituents, and this failure – which may be foundational to a given country's sense and use of democracy as a form of governance – complicates the will to address social and economic inequalities. This article does not question the so-called "tyranny of the majority" or the old mischaracterization that democracy is "mob rule." Instead, it shows how the central issue in addressing inequality as a whole lies within the "flattening of choice" in neoliberal democratic systems that fail to recognize the socio-political pressures placed on constituents. This article argues that in order to fully address socio-economic inequality we should explore the means of improving democratic governance at a fundamental level. By this, we do not

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imply or argue that democracy should be rejected, but that Western discourses should re-think what the democratic process is and its role in governance when addressing inequalities.

We present this argument by engaging Amartya Sen and Herbert Marcuse in a critical theoretical analysis of Western democracy. We chose Sen for this examination since the principles of capability theory have become increasingly popular in the evaluation of human development and welfare. International institutions and programs such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the World Happiness Report (WHR) have been using the principles of capability theory for their reports claiming it to be a broad-based understanding for human development and social welfare.[1] Both the UNDP and the WHR claim to embrace a broader understanding of human development and social welfare; however, these evaluations still perpetuate a presupposition of a universal criterion developed from neoliberal (i.e., Western) norms and ideals. These presuppositional ideals of democracy hinder an in-depth exploration of neoliberal democracy and the proliferation of democratic theories from alternative perspectives.

Sen advocates for what he refers to as a "universal democracy" that is supported and reinforced by his capability theory. We will highlight how this concept of universality limits the development of alternative approaches to democratic theory. Through a critical theoretical analysis via Herbert Marcuse, we will examine how the competitive, adversarial (and, typically, "winner-take-all") nature of Western democracies reinforces the one-dimensional paradigm of a neoliberal political rationality. This, we find, has a "flattening" effect whereby the electoral decisions a voter makes fail to provide robust, valid options when deciding upon a candidate who represents a constituent's interest. We argue that this compromises the concept of choice, which is central to Sen's thesis.

The upshot of this analysis is, again, an argument that researchers and policy makers need to reconsider the ways in which democracies operate when addressing economic and social inequalities. Concerning research on Sen, this article also criticizes his concept of choice and how it needs to take into account a qualitative approach to the options considered: are they validly representative of the electorate or variations of the same? Such reconsiderations may need to go beyond mere reform, and fundamentally explore the core operations and ideals within democracy itself, or at least how they are employed. It would be unwieldy to suggest other options within this article, given our scope and space limitations, but our hope is that this research can form the basis for these reconsiderations in future research on the democratic process.

2 A critique of Western-style democracy: Amartya Sen and Herbert Marcuse

Amartya Sen formulates his notion of a universal democracy from the Cambridge Tradition and employs what he calls an "ontological focus" in his critique.[2] Therefore, it is important to note that The Cambridge Tradition is underpinned by two primary economic motivations: First, it focuses on human welfare, which is the central focus or goal to Sen's capability approach. Second, it is heavily influenced by classical

1 United Nations Development Program, *Happiness and Human Development*, 7–8; The World Happiness Report, *The World Happiness Report*, 12.

2 See Martins, "Sen's Capability Approach and Post Keynesianism," 691–703. The ontological focus of the Cambridge tradition is characterized by "themes of openness and uncertainty" which is an alternative to the heterodox approaches based on mathematical deductive methods. The ontological focus acknowledges the interconnectedness between philosophy and economics, essentially brought on by Marxist theory, and understands the plurality, uncertainties, and intersubjective nature of the social realm and the economic system.

For further reading on an in-depth discussion on the ontological aspects and characteristics of Sen's capability theory see: Matins, "Ethics, Ontology and Capabilities." For an overview of the methodological approaches, i.e., the heterodox approach and ontological approach, and the significant role that the Cambridge School played in the development of the ontological approach see: Bigo's, "Open and Closed systems and the Cambridge School."

economics, which informs Sen's understanding of economic behavior.[3] Comparatively, Marcuse's critique of democracy stems from the Marxist tradition of the Frankfurt School. From his critical theoretical approach, he argues that political and economic domination is prevalent within Western capitalist society.[4] Marcuse's theories specifically focus on the concept of false needs and the repression of true needs within advanced industrial and affluent societies.[5] The dual focus of Sen's ontological approach, human development, and classic economics has the implication that Sen views economic development and political progress as interdependent. Specifically, Sen's approach sees democracy as a means to employ and sustain a given economic-political model that sees its economic growth as a corollary to political progress and development. Contrariwise, Marcuse sees Western democracy as "competitive democracy" where varying classes and organizations of people are pitted against each other to seize control through governance and thus promote their own sense of growth and progress, often unwittingly promoting ideologies based upon needs that run countervailingly to their own concerns.

Returning to Sen, his capability approach undergirds his basic formula for effective governance, given its ties to economic and socio-political development. This approach is used often by Sen and others to evaluate the different aspects of a person's well-being to interpret and understand economic development, inequality, and poverty. Robeyns has defined the capability approach as a "broad normative framework for the evaluation and assessment of individual well-being and social arrangements."[6] Sen himself stated that the capability approach can be utilized for a variety of applications.[7] However, for our purposes, it is important to note how its economic programmatics directly relate to a Western-style democracy that has increasingly evolved into a neoliberal approach.

This slow but deliberate adoption stems from what the capability approach, ironically, attempted to critique and remedy. The capability approach was mainly developed as an alternative to the utilitarian income-based methods, as well as other, similar models.[8] Sen's capability approach is focused on human well-being and socio-political development and, although Sen is focused on the end goal of enhancing well-being, he argues that a central component to attaining well-being comes through the promotion of what he calls "capabilities." What he means by this is that evaluating a person's well-being is dependent on their "functionings," which requires a broader analysis that includes both resources, opportunities for development, and freedom of choice. The intersectionality of these factors thus becomes a necessary precondition to enhance well-being: "functionings are constitutive of a person's being, and an evaluation of well-being has to take the form of an assessment of these constituent elements."[9] Furthermore, Sen argues that one must have the freedom to decide or choose how to live their life, which will become important when discussing Marcuse further below. In short, for Sen, choice relates to a given person's capabilities and therefore is related to the infinite number of possible functionings that a person can achieve. Consequently, capabilities and human agency both focus on a person's ability to choose which life they "have reason to value."[10]

Democracy therefore is central to Sen's capability approach, for him it is "critically important for the development of human capabilities."[11] He has even reinforced this belief by arguing for "universal democracy."[12] Sen's advocacy for universal democracy – which we find, and have argued above, is synonymous to neoliberal democracy – is founded on political freedom and public participation, and he specifically associates the concept of democracy with that of the public reason. Therefore, Sen's vision of democracy is not merely based on a "mechanical condition" that is simply composed of elections and voting. Rather, he

3 Martins, "Sen's Capability Approach and Post Keynesianism," 692.
4 Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 8.
5 Ibid., 12–4.
6 Robeyns, "The Capability Approach," 94.
7 Sen, "Capability and Well-Being," 39.
8 Sen, *Inequality Re-Examined*, 87.
9 Ibid., 39.
10 Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 75.
11 Sen, "Responses to Commentaries," 79.
12 Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 147–52.

argues for a democracy that is embodied by the concept of "government by discussion" which expands and develops "global roots."[13]

However, the problem is Sen's vagueness on how this conceptualization of the democratic process operates in achieving social justice and overcoming problems such as economic inequality. Furthermore, what does a "universal democracy" foundationally entail? What are its presuppositions and how does it intend to address the needs and concerns of all cultures, communities, and even nations who – through colonialism or other forms of warfare waged for territorial gain – never received the opportunity to define their own borders, concept of nationhood, and so forth?[14]

There is a fundamental problem with the concept of "universal" here, which stems from a Western philosophical ideal that there can indeed be a singular, univocal framework for not merely justice, but how that justice is meted out.[15] As many African scholars point out, at times it is too broad to properly function, while at other times the notion of a universal sense of "person" and "community" presupposes Western ideals that are incongruent with the multi-cultural declaration it seeks to implement.[16]

For one example, among many, consider how Tsenay Serequeberhan effectively reveals the ways in which this concept of universalism is not only Eurocentric in character, but arises at the expense of others.[17] In his meticulous critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, Serequeberhan effectively shows how Hegel's assertion that this theory of the concept's movement toward the "Universal" endorses the expansion of wealth – and thus its "remedy" to the rabble and impoverished – through colonialism. Hegel's theory of progress, and the progression of ethics and reason, comes at the expense of the non-European:

> Migration and "systematic colonization" directed by the state (Pr. 246–9), however, does not fulfil the "primary purpose" of the public authority which is to "actualize and maintain the universal contained within the particularity of civil society" (Pr. 249). Rather, it simply displaces it and duplicates the contradictions of civil society on a new soil. The colonies are nothing but the mirror reflection of a distorted Europe.
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> Paradoxically, however, Hegel views this whole development as the spread of culture and civilization (Pr. 247). He maintains that communication and commerce motivated by gain and the "colonizing activity – sporadic and systematic – to which the mature civil society is driven" serve as important instruments of culture (Pr. 248). It is clear, then, that colonialism arises from the internal dynamics of European modernity. What is silently left out of Hegel's assessment, however, is the fact that colonialism is also grounded on the destruction of non-European civilizations. There is also a related problem. Hegel uses the adjective "mature" in describing the civil society that is driven to colonialism. But how is this term to be understood? Is a "mature civil society" a society that has reached its peak, whatever that might mean, or is it like an overripe fruit that is falling apart and disintegrating? From what has already been said, the latter seems to be the case.[18]

What Serequeberhan and other decolonial thinkers reveal is how certain concepts, particularly concepts which are the bedrock to our contemporary notion of democracy and how it relates to inequality, hold within them Eurocentric presumptions which require further scrutiny. Sen's notion of a universal democracy is rooted in a Kantian rationality which becomes apparent in his emphasis of personal choice as an exercise of sovereign agency. The Kantian conception of a liberal political philosophy emphasizes an ethical appreciation of individualism over the notion of freedom and rights of all.[19] This Kantian conception in Sen's notion of universal democracy also extends to individual rights over the well-being of the general

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13 Sen, "Democracy as a Universal Value," 8–9.

14 See also: Mbembe, *Necropolitics,* 9–41; Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth,* 97–103, 115; Forjwuour, "Colonizing 'Free' Will," 48–85.

15 Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars,* 3–5, 7–9.

16 See, for example: Oyowe, "An African Conception of Human Rights?."

17 Serequeberhan shows a similar, damning issue within Kant: Serequeberhan, "Eurocentricism in Philosophy." Although there are more recent sources which emphasize the points we are making, we chose Serequeberhan's critique due to the fact that both of these articles scrupulously detail the specific issues within universalism within two of the founding philosophers of modernity's conception of freedom, universality, and reason.

18 Serequeberhan, "The Idea of Colonialism in Hegel's Philosophy of Right," 312.

19 Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice,* 2–3.

public.[20] According to Habermas, Immanuel Kant connected personal autonomy with political participation to develop the concept of public reasoning.[21] Habermas argues that for Kant an informed public engaged in rational debate as citizens that would form the basis of public opinion.[22] Kant played a crucial role in the development of liberal principals in *Enlightenment* thinking, specifically the importance of democracy as "the principle of publicity."[23] Consequently, Kant's theories on political participation became pivotal to how democracy is conceived of today.[24]

Kant's influence on Sen's notion of a universal democracy becomes clear through the emphasis on political participation and individual agency. Sen's notion of a universal democracy suggests that an individual has the ability for the "careful assessment of aims, objectives, allegiances, etc., and the conception of the good," and that "persons must enter the moral accounting of others, not only as people whose well-being demands concern, but also as people whose responsible agency must be recognized."[25] Agency also contributes to the promotion and development of "free agencies of other kinds."[26]

Northover maintains that despite Sen's radical new ontological approach of capabilities for evaluating well-being that moves away from the utilitarian ethics for social choice, his approach is fundamentally compromised.[27] She argues that Sen's developmental economics is compromised because its "complicity with an ideal of freedom, is rooted in and is measured by a transcendent figure of sovereign agency."[28] She refers to the concept of sovereign agency as "the mask and spirit of modern power."[29] She highlights the Kantian figure of power, or sovereign agency, that is envisioned in Sen's notion of freedom.

We can understand the complications of Sen's notion of a universal democracy that is rooted in the Kantian tradition through Wendy Brown's description of sovereign agency. Brown claims that sovereignty should be understood as a "form of power."[30] She refers to the concept of sovereign agency as a "border concept."[31] Her description of sovereign agency as a border concept reflects the notion that sovereign agency does not only demarcate the "boundaries of an entity (as in jurisdictional sovereignty) but through this demarcation setting terms and organizing space both inside and outside the entity."[32] Thus, sovereign agency "signifies supremacy of power and authority … Yet turned outward, or in the space beyond jurisdiction, sovereignty conveys autonomy or self-rule, and the capacity for independence of action. Inside sovereignty expresses power beyond accountability."[33] From this description of sovereign agency we can better understand Northover's critique of Sen's "global development project" that includes "liberal democratic processes" as inevitably perpetuating and rationalizing Western exceptionalism.[34] Moreover, Zheng and Stahl argue that Sen's participatory approach to economic development "may disguise or even

20 Ibid.

21 Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 99.

22 Ibid., 106–7.

23 Muhlmann, *Journalism for Democracy*, 51.

24 Phelan and Dawes, Liberalism and Neoliberalism, 4. State the following regarding Kant's significant influence on how we understand political participation and democracy today: "the public sphere emerged as a key organizational principle of the liberal constitutional state, with civil society, including the market, established as the sphere of private autonomy. In the sociological conditions that Kant deemed necessary for a public sphere, its dependence upon the social relationships among an elite of freely competing commodity owners and traders was paramount. This took the historical form of a bourgeois revolution that established a sphere of liberal autonomy insulated from the arbitrary power of the state, which was embedded in capitalist mores and practices."

25 Sen, "Well-Being, Agency and Freedom," 204.

26 Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 4.

27 Other authors that critique Sen's conceptualization of agency and how it relates to freedom and sovereignty are Corbridge, "Development as Freedom;" Devereux, "Sen's Entitlement Approach;" and Navarro, "Development and Quality of Life."

28 Northover, "Abject Blackness, Hauntologies of Development, and the Demand for Authenticity," 68.

29 Ibid.

30 Brown, "Sovereignty and the Return of the Repressed," 253.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Northover, "Abject Blackness, Hauntologies of Development, and the Demand for Authenticity," 75.

strengthen incipient articulation of power embedded in social and cultural practices" (Zheng & Stahl, 2011, 75).[35] They furthermore highlight that Sen's approach to economic development could also perpetuate existing inequalities and uphold the "agendas of elites and other more powerful actors" (Zheng & Stahl, 2011, 75).[36]

The *Enlightenment* development project robbed people of their historical agency. The critique on Sen's notion of a universal democracy rooted in these problematic Enlightenment ideals also brings into question his understanding of ethics within the historical context. Northover questions Sen's evaluation of ethics through continuing and "marketing" freedom as a "historical product," which still has a lingering effect on the historical process.[37] She argues that Sen's following of the traditional Kantian understanding of freedom is closely aligned with an *Enlightenment* rationality and, consequently, that the "states of violence and poverty" are reduced to the "irrationality of the colonized mind."[38]

It is beyond our scope to proceed further into what these presumptions are and what recent scrutiny has unveiled, but our central point remains: what does the "universal" entail within Sen's concept of democracy, and how does its notion of choice – a central component to capability theory – eliminate inequality outside of the expense of others?[39]

These questions resonate with Herbert Marcuse's critique, where he questions the notion of a "universal democracy" with "global roots," arguing that the democratization of culture has become a new totalitarianism. While neoliberal capitalist democracies were at war with the neo-Stalin dictatorships in the 1950s and 1960s, Marcuse questioned the economies and societies upon which these ideals of Western, capitalist democracies were upheld.[40] Through this, he argued that both capitalist, Western democracies and "contemporary industrial society tends to be totalitarian."[41] The totalitarian order that Marcuse saw emerging from capitalist democracies was an "economy of multinational private enterprise."[42] Marcuse stated that the economy of private enterprise was based on "a non-terroristic economic-technical coordination which operated through the manipulation of needs by vested interests."[43]

Furthermore, a so-called universal democracy "manifests itself precisely in a harmonizing pluralism, where the most contradictory works and truths peacefully coexist in indifference."[44] Finally, Marcuse critiques Western democratic processes for their homogenization, which is a very real threat to developing countries. Spoken plainly, unifying terms are often used in democratic countries; take for example "one flag, one nation." However, people's experiences in those countries can vary drastically based on their economic income, race, religion etc.[45] Marcuse's critique of capitalist democracy thus provides a crucial understanding of social relationships, historical-economic developments, and political conflicts. Marcuse re-emerges as being crucially relevant to reckoning with contemporary society due to its comprehensive critique of the historical-economic nature of society.[46]

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35 Zheng and Stahl, "Technology, Capabilities and Critical Perspectives," 75.

36 Ibid.

37 Northover, "Abject Blackness, Hauntologies of Development, and the Demand for Authenticity," 75.

38 Ibid.

39 Although we argue that Sen's support for a universal democracy is rooted in a Eurocentric understanding of democracy that perpetuates Western Ideals at the cost of non-Western societies and cultures, this does not necessarily mean that non-Western alternatives object to universalism or universal ideals and concepts. One such example is Otu's, *Left Universalism, Africancentric Essays* which explores and discusses moral universals and how they are expressed within African(a) culture and philosophies.

40 Luke, "A Systematic Critique of Human Domination and Nature-Society Relations," 95.

41 Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man,* 3.

42 Luke, "A Systematic Critique of Human Domination and Nature-Society Relations," 95.

43 Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man,* 3.

44 Ibid., 64. For more on the pluralism within Western democracy see Mouffe's, *The Democratic Paradox*.

45 Marcuse developed his critique of pure tolerance based on this notion. For more on this see *Repressive Tolerance*.

46 See Brown, *Edgework*, 45. Wendy Brown furthers Marcuse's critique, stating that neoliberalism forms "relatively differentiated moral, economic, and political rationalities and venues in liberal democratic orders to their discursive and practical integration." Brown specifically refers to Marcuse and continues by noting that there is a "tension between a capitalist political economy and a liberal democratic system."

Finally, one can also see how the ontological aspects of "openness, uncertainly, and intersubjectivity" within the Cambridge tradition becomes the Achilles heel in Sen's capability approach. Many critics, most notably Martha Nussbaum, argues that Sen overemphasizes the concepts of agency, choice, and plurality, which ultimately undermines his pursuit of social justice via a democratic process, which she finds him leaving the process too vague and presumptuous. She states that Sen "feels that people should be allowed to settle these matters for themselves … suggesting that democracy is inhibited by the endorsement of a set of central entitlements in international political debate."[47] This reveals an inherent tension within Sen's project for a "universal democracy." On the one hand, he argues for universal democratic principles that presuppose Western neoliberal ideals. On the other hand, he argues for plurality of socio-political ideals and norms, but his Western presuppositions leave little room for this plurality to flourish as its own, self-determined notion of public governance. That plurality dissolves into Marcuse's aforementioned indifference under and against the dominant norms of advanced industrial society.

In fairness, Sen's approach does try to ameliorate these foundational concerns through his concept of participation. Also, the concept of equal participation within the political and social environment is clearly of great concern for Sen. Furthermore, Sen argues that "political freedoms and liberties are permissive advantages, and their effectiveness would depend on how they are exercised."[48] Sen argues that in a democratic society, problems such as poverty, inequality, and famine are addressed rather quickly. He makes the claim that in a democracy "people tend to get what they demand, and more crucially, do not typically get what they do not demand."[49] It is clear, then, that Sen places great emphasis on safeguarding "the conditions and circumstances that ensure the range and reach of the democratic process."[50] Furthermore, Sen argues that democracy is a precondition for "harmonious and reasoned progress towards a more prosperous, just society."[51] However, Sandbrook claims that "Sen's pragmatic brand of neoliberalism purveys a false promise to the poor and socially excluded" critique of Sen's *Development as Freedom* centers on the democratic process being dependent on individual actors and negates the fact that national concerns often compete with international, mostly Western, interests.[52]

This goes to the problem of what the democratic process is and what a "democratic society" entails. The tension between national and international interests points to the adversarial nature that runs contrary to the participation in enhancing capabilities that he champions: though it is clear that people must be critically aware to make social, political, and economic demands within a democratic society, they are still pitted against each other when making political decisions with their concerns in competition with each other rather than in a dialogical, consensus, and upbuilding fashion. Capabilities may be enhanced for some, but do they come at the expense of others, specifically the global south? Of course, Sen would prefer this not to happen, and perhaps it does not need to be the case if we were to rethink how political discourses force a decision of who wins and who loses – both candidates and constituents – when one enters the voting booth. Yet, as we have seen through Marcuse, and others, there remain several outstanding issues concerning how a neoliberal democracy often operates in contradistinction to Sen's aims.

In sum, what we are arguing is that although Sen makes a salient, programmatic proposal for the benefits of a universal democracy he overlooks some crucial aspects and presuppositions within the larger macro-economic system. Specifically, Sen overlooks the pivotal role that neoliberalism plays in the proper functioning of democratic societies, as well as people's everyday life choices. To uncover some of these aspects, we turn to Herbert Marcuse's critique of advanced capitalist societies and how this has been adapted to address a contemporary global neoliberal society. He claims that people develop a political passivity which is characteristic of a one-dimensionality. In what follows, we will detail Marcuse's critique of democracy's subservience to the economic realities of advanced capitalism and how it deepens the

47 Nussbaum, "Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements," 44.
48 Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 154.
49 Ibid., 156.
50 Ibid., 158.
51 Ibid., 279.
52 Sandbrook, "Globalization and the Limits of Neoliberal Development Doctrine," 10171.

concerns we have identified in Sen's underlying assumptions about democracy as a paradigm for addressing inequality.

3 Marcuse on one-dimensionality

Before we can understand how one-dimensionality and neoliberalism underlie the hidden presumptions within democracy and how he applies this to contemporary society (both Western and globalist), it is worthwhile to unpack what Marcuse means by these terms with the help of Wendy Brown. Therefore, the beginning of this section will address these terms before integrating them into Marcuse's larger critique of democracy.

Marcuse argues that under the rule of a repressive society "liberty can be made into a powerful instrument of domination."[53] He states that this is specifically a characteristic of materially affluent societies where society "takes care of the need for liberation by satisfying the needs which make servitude palatable and perhaps even unnoticeable, and it accomplishes this fact in the process of production itself."[54] Therefore, Marcuse would argue that people do not exercise their political participation to the fullest extent in advanced, industrial societies. He specifically argues that they have grown indifferent and have limited participation in social and political decision-making and policy development. He argues that people in advanced, industrial societies have become politically passive due to what he calls "false needs" which he relates to our basic concept of (or at least our practice of) freedom:[55]

> The range of choice open to the individual is not the decisive factor in determining the degree of human freedom, but what can be chosen and what is chosen by the individual. The criterion for free choice can never be an absolute one, but neither is it entirely relative. Free election of masters does not abolish the masters or the slaves. Free choice among a wide variety of goods and services does not signify freedom if these goods and services sustain social controls over a life's toil and fear – that is, if they sustain alienation. And the spontaneous reproduction of superimposed needs by the individual does not establish autonomy; it only testifies to the efficacy of the controls.[56]

In other words, Marcuse contends the notion that a proliferation of "capabilities" or opportunities would lead to democratic or individual freedom. Instead, Marcuse argues that the proliferation of "capabilities" in a false system would only perpetuate and escalate an already oppressive system.[57] Furthermore, people are exhausted by focusing their critical thinking and capabilities on "what to buy" and applying that same reasoning when choosing "who to vote for." Building on Marcuse's argument of political passivity, Wendy Brown adds that an all-too-comfortable working middle class does not aid in the disruption of the political and capitalist elite:

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53 Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 9.

54 Ibid, 26

55 Marcuse, *Repressive Tolerance*, 175–6 states: "I believe that all dialectic is liberation…and not only liberation in an intellectual sense, but liberation involving the mind and the body, liberation involving entire human existence …. Now in what sense is all dialectic liberation? It is liberation from the repressive, from a bad, a false system – be it an organic system, be it a social system, be it a mental or intellectual system: liberation by forces developing within such a system. That is a decisive point. And liberation by virtue of the contradiction generated by the system, precisely because it is a bad, a false system."

56 Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man,* 7.

57 Marcuse's notion of political passivity focused on the prevalence of an industrial rationality within advanced capitalist and industrial society. Marcuse argues that an "industrial rationality," what Weber referred to as "technological rationality," runs parallel to the control of labor (specifically people) within such societies. He argued that this industrial rationality is unique to the capitalist wage system, and it is through the mechanization within advanced industrial societies that exercising control over people becomes attainable and invaluable. Marcuse claims that people within these societies become disinterested, alienated, separated from their day-to-day lives and their true needs. For more on this see Marcuse, "Industrialization and Capitalism in the Work of Marx Weber."

> Capitalist commodity production is also ever more orientated to the pleasures of the middle class consumer, and the middle class is ever more oriented by its own pleasures … Capitalism charms rather than alienates us with its constant modifications of our needs and with its output for our mere entertainment, and we are remarkably acclimated to its production of algorithmic increases in rates of redundancy and replacement of technologies.[58]

Furthermore, since neoliberal individuals view themselves and others with this greater standard of responsibility, champions of neoliberalism (whether they call themselves neoliberal or not) typically hold the idea that those in poverty "found" themselves that way through their own devices by making bad choices as if there were any "good" or better choices for one to make. One can see this in popular discourses where columnists and television pundits admonish the working poor for their spending habits or for not working hard enough, even though many of the working class must have two or more jobs just to make ends meet.[59]

Brown deepens Marcuse's critique by showcasing the model neoliberal citizen as one that is concerned with their own social, economic, and political goals and who shows little concern with larger public interests.[60] Brown argues that neoliberalism has created a narrative of individuals as rational economic agents that is "calculating rather than rule abiding, a Benthamite rather than a Hobbesian."[61] Brown specifically refers to the example of "self-care" where individuals are encouraged to act as rational economic agents with a calculated moral autonomy. According to Brown, this interpretation of self-care puts the responsibility of provision on the individual, including their needs and ambitions.[62] Understanding self-care in these terms equates moral autonomy to rational actions that are deliberated within the terms of cost–benefit analysis. Brown concludes, despite individuals being encouraged to act with moral autonomy and take on the responsibility of self-care, that they are made to be complacent citizens who are politically passive.[63]

As we have described it thus far, Marcuse highlights the crucial part that consumerism and other economic factors play in our political participation and decision-making processes which become an obstacle to achieving social justice. Although this will be further unpacked in what follows, through Brown we have shown the initial ways in which Marcuse's critique of advanced industrial society is crucially relevant in contemporary neoliberal society. Brown reveals Marcuse's critique as a process which is always already ongoing in our contemporary globalist society and how this tacitly runs through our sense of choice. This, we argue, is directly tied to how one understands "freedom," particularly freedom of choice. Pivoting back to Sen, we can see how these problematics are at play with his (as well as others') sense of democracy.

4 Sen on universal democracy

In pursuit of a socially just society, Sen's heavy reliance on democracy necessitates an extremely effective and competent democratic system; one that we find is, despite his good intentions, overly idealist and utopian. For instance, he states that the "achievement of social justice depends not only on institutional forms (including democratic rules and regulations), but also on effective practice."[64] He further argues that there is a shared sense of responsibility between the individual and the state and claims that "an exclusive reliance on individual responsibility is not, as is sometimes assumed, the so-called nanny state. There is a

58 Brown, *Edgework,* 67.
59 Holcombe, *Political Capitalism,* provides an interesting counterview and an in-depth analysis of the influence of political capitalism on the development and escalation of inequalities within Western Democracies.
60 Brown, *Edgework,* 43.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid., 25.
63 Ibid., 43.
64 Sen, *Development as Freedom,* 159.

difference between 'nannying' an individual's choices and [between] creating more opportunity for choice and for substantive decisions for individuals who can then act responsibly on that basis."[65] However, these clear demarcations are either too idealistic and abstract, or at least too vague, to be effective foundations for creating a self-sustaining governance that is in line with his capability theory. As Stewart and Deneulin argue, Sen is occasionally guilty of oversimplifying the democratic process and idealizes democracies whereby "political power, political economy and struggle are absent."[66]

Building on his idealized view of the democratic process, Sen emphasizes how important it is to not let economic factors influence political participation and decision-making. The inherent tension in Sen's approach once again becomes clear: On the one hand, Sen makes the argument that states should prioritize the development of "political liberty and democratic rights" above the "fulfilment of basic economic needs."[67] On the other hand, he adds that the "intensity of economic needs adds to – rather that subtracts from – the urgency of political freedoms."[68] In other words, he claims that encouraging democratic values will be essential to the development of other fields of human development, which would automatically also include economic development. However, Sen claims that political freedoms lead to the "direction of a general pre-eminence of basic political and liberal rights."[69] This reflects Nussbaum's critique and concern of Sen's vagueness of how social justice will be achieved through the democratic system.[70] Furthermore, at one point he clearly states that public discussion and democratic choice are important to determine "a proper understanding of what economic needs are" and to "express publicly what we value and to demand that attention be paid to it."[71] Yet, Sen also argues that "the specific form their fulfilments may take would tend to vary from society to society."[72]

Sen's reliance on political participation and public reason becomes problematic in the face of political passivity and one-dimensionality. When Sen argues that people should identify their own economic needs and that these needs vary from one context to the next, he does not take into consideration the massive influence of conglomerates on constructing needs and swaying political interests. As we shall argue below, this influence creates a "flattening of choice" whereby the voter, stuck within the socio-economic one-dimensionality that has become part and parcel of neoliberal democracy, has very little choice from which to choose. This lack of choice – regardless of the number of candidates running for a given office – needs to be addressed in order for Sen's capability theory to adequately work toward social and economic equality.

5 Marcuse and the flattening of choice

Returning to Marcuse, he notes how many working-class people enjoy the same commodities and services as the rich, which has a "flattening effect," if you will, that gives the illusion that we are all making the same choices and, resultantly, making them with the same responsibilities in mind.[73] This has massive consequences, especially when, as Brown points out, that many with the neoliberal mindset assert that the impoverished are there because of their own choices and sensibility; as if those with that mindset are saying "if the poor only made the decisions that *I made, then they wouldn't be poor*." Marcuse's argument that both classes engage in the same commodity consumption – at least on a basic level of goods – reveals how this mindset takes hold and propagates itself toward larger economic and political presumptions.

65 Ibid., 285.
66 Stewart and Deneulin, "Amartya Sen's Contribution to Development Thinking," 63–4.
67 Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 148.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
70 Nussbaum, "Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements," 36.
71 Sen, "Democracy as a Universal Value," 52.
72 Sen, *Inequality Re-Examined*, 110.
73 Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 8.

Take Coca Cola as an example, one can imagine that Bill Gates and an employee in one of his businesses enjoying the same product. Brands like Coca Cola and McDonalds are marketed as universal products.[74] Moreover, these corporate entities and the demand for their products point to a greater sociopolitical system at large:

> If the worker and his boss enjoy the same television program and visit the same resort places, if the typist is as attractively made up as the daughter of her employer … if they all read the same newspaper, then this assimilation indicates not the disappearance of classes, but the extent to which the needs and satisfaction that serve the preservation of the establishment are shared by the underlying population.[75]

For Marcuse, democracy becomes "the most efficient system of domination" because it presumes the same notion of political choice – as seen in Coca-Cola and McDonalds – for both the rich and the poor. His main objection is based on the concept of political values becoming part of determining human needs and human development. Sen himself argues that democracy is only as effective as its implementation.[76] However, Marcuse points us to a flaw in the current Western democratic system: while providing the illusion of choice, it actually creates more limitations on individual freedoms. It does so through a political and economic system imposed through capitalist endeavors which are packaged as "democratic":

> Under these circumstances, even the existing liberties and escapes fall in place within the organized whole. At this stage of the regimented market, is competition alleviating or intensifying the race for bigger and faster turnover and obsolescence? Are the political parties competing for pacification or for a stronger and more costly armament industry? Is the production of 'affluence' promoting or delaying the satisfaction of still unfulfilled vital needs? If the first alternatives are true, the contemporary form of pluralism would strengthen the potential for the containment of qualitative change, and thus prevent rather than impel the 'catastrophe' of self-determination.[77]

As seen from the quote above, Marcuse sees political domination through democracy as the obfuscation of the qualitative changes necessary for radical self-determination. However, stepping back for a moment, we can also see that the common goals for both Sen and Marcuse are achieving maximal justice and welfare. The issue is how to orient ourselves toward these goals and whether some of our current orientations – both through institutions and the policies they enact – actually pull us further away from them.

Absent the fantastical imaginations of a benevolent dictator, all societies must go through the messy practice of deliberating competing interests concerning what are the "best" policies for their communities. This typically results in people forming political parties to advance their interests. Furthermore, within democratic frameworks the primary means of defrayal are to create either a political passivity or false consciousness among a society's respective political parties. The competitive foundation of Western democracies, where political parties are pitted against each other, is a central problem for achieving the most social welfare and justice, and, if this is so, then perhaps we should reconsider the operation of democracy from a more fundamental level. Marcuse refers to this theory of democracy as the "competitive theory of democracy."[78] He claims that democracy functions under the guise of a political competition that does not benefit any of its citizens.[79] He highlights this by asking "when does political competition produce a 'process of consent', and when does it produce a 'process of manipulation'?"[80] Here, Marcuse's critique

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74 Additionally, Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism,* argues that multi-national corporations and their political influence follow under Marcuse's critique in the way that they have become "a new economic orthodoxy regulating public policy," 22. He goes on to state that "a benevolent mask full of wonderful-sounding words like freedom, liberty, choice and rights, to hide the grim realities of the restoration or reconstitution of naked class power … in the main financial centers of global capitalism," 119.

75 Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man,* 8.

76 Sen, *Development as Freedom,* 154, 156.

77 Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man,* 55–6.

78 Ibid, 117.

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid., 118.

raises concerns against the very validity of a capitalist democracy by arguing that it is a system of domination.[81]

It should be recalled, though, that our paper's thesis is that a competitive, adversarial democracy pits constituents against each other and, in so doing, it fails to consider the concerns and issues of the entire corresponding constituency (i.e., all of the citizens within the nation). What Sen has argued is that economic inequality can be best understood through the capabilities of that constituency, and it can be ameliorated by enhancing those capabilities. Though this is not the only means by which he argues those capabilities can be enhanced, much of his argument rises and falls with a functioning democracy aimed toward progressing access to the means by which capability is enhanced.

What we have shown through Marcuse is that there are underlying, neoliberal assumptions both within the economic notion of what capabilities are – the one-dimensional nature whereby consumption, or better yet, the capability to consume – becomes the demarcation between progress and destitution. Likewise, this one-dimensional nature infects the democratic foundation through which capabilities are supposedly enhanced: the "choice" of politics becomes the "choice" of who can consume more and at what rate. Brown effectively lands this critique when she argues how neoliberals believe that poverty, in and of itself, is a choice: or at least that the impoverished made the wrong choice.[82]

Returning to adversarial democracy, then, we find that its fundamental failure is two-fold: On the one hand, in its idealistic version, it pits the interests of one group of citizens over the other, thereby potentially increasing the prosperity of one group over the other which typically leads to inequalities. On the other hand, the neoliberal framework upon which most Western democracies currently function has effectively flattened all choices for the sake of a one-dimensional system whereby the so-called "choice" between parties does not favor one party over the other, it favors one class of people (the rich) over the other (the poor) regardless of whom is on the ballot. The adversarial, competitive nature hides this one-dimensionality in the same way that Marcuse argues that "this assimilation indicates not the disappearance of classes, but the extent to which the needs and satisfaction that serve the preservation of the establishment are shared by the underlying population."[83]

6 Conclusion: Democratic scrutiny

What we have argued throughout this article is that for Sen's capability approach to addressing inequalities and the current, adversarial nature of neoliberal democracy holds critical presuppositions that need to be further scrutinized. We did this by first unpacking Sen's capability approach as a means for addressing these inequalities. Next, we critiqued how his understanding of neoliberal, or "universal democracy" as the key driving force behind enhancing personal choice – and thus enhancing both individual and collective capabilities – is problematic in two ways: first we critiqued some of the presumptions latent within this concept of democracy. Afterward, we explored neoliberalism which runs throughout contemporary, adversarial democracy as seen in the social theoretical critique of Herbert Marcuse. The intent of this approach was to first show some foundational concerns. Therefore, even if one were to proceed nonetheless with this style of democracy, one would have to address neoliberal economic and social problemata which run throughout our contemporary democratic governance.

To put it simply, even if we were to continue with democracy as-is, there's a flattening of choice within the process itself: does this adversarial, "winner-take-all" approach actively give voters opportunities to enhance their well-being – à la Sen and others – or is it one dimensional in nature? If it is, then what choice

81 Ibid., 56, 68.

82 Brown, *Edgework*, 43.

83 Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 8. For more see: Richie et al., "Lessons from the Use of Ranked Choice Voting in American Presidential Primaries;" and Santucci, "Variants of Ranked-Choice Voting from a Strategic Perspective."

is there to enhance those capabilities, to in the very least reduce inequalities? The "winner-take-all" form of democracy has inherent flaws within both Sen's understanding of democracy, and we believe that our findings could be expanded upon – or at least used as a *reportage* to – other researchers exploring these aforementioned strategies limited in our scope.

In conclusion, though, we find that many social theorists and economists presume too much when they propose ideas like choice, freedom, and democracy as key components within their approaches to eliminating economic inequality. Of course, for some researchers, this is old news, but it is important news that needs to be repeatedly explored to be adequately understood. There is a not only a flattening of choice in our current democratic strategies, thanks to extant neoliberal economic and social policies, but there's also a question of what "choice" and "democratic" even means. This article, in part, reveals access points to further examine those questions, hopefully giving rise to new dimensions or pathways to rethinking how we employ political concepts when addressing inequalities.

Conflict of interest: Authors state no conflict of interest.

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