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ELEMENTS OF AMARTYA SEN ON FATALISM, FAMINES AND DEMOCRACY

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i) Introduction

‘Hundreds of thousands, indeed, millions, can die from calamitous inaction resulting from unreasoned fatalism masquerading as composure based on realism and common sense.’ (‘The Idea of Justice’, p. 47)

My principal aim in this analysis is to describe Sen’s meditation as a teaching against fatalism, indifference, resignation and inaction: Sen’s criticism of these attitudes aims to uncover the deep roots of these attitudes themselves, since these attitudes conceal precise responsibilities.

Sen fights both in economics and in ethics against every form of concealing, under the idea of the unavoidability of nature, failures due to human mistakes. Unavoidable destiny proves to be, actually, as not so unavoidable as someone would like to present it. For instance, Sen’s opinion that famines are not a natural, but a social phenomenon aims to uncover all the attempts to present famines as something unavoidable, in relation to which the only solution is resignation. Sen’s intention is clearly to say that famines have precise responsibilities, and that those who present famines as natural phenomenon want to conceal their own responsibilities for the insurgence of famines. Governments try to blame on nature the cause of catastrophes, whereas the causes of social catastrophes are to be connected to the inefficiency of governments.

In particular, I would like to concentrate my exposition on the following themes:

- Sen’s criticism of the thesis of food shortages as the (only) cause of famines.
- Famines happening when there is no political will that want to fight against the factors bringing to the famines. Persons, and not nature, are responsible for the occurring of famines.
- Sen’s defense of democracy as a system which is compatible with economic growth against all those who considers democracy as an obstacle to economic growth.

ii) Sen against David Ricardo (and against fatalism)

I would like to consider the following passages from Sen’s book *The Idea of Justice*; this text is useful in order to introduce us into the

discussion of fatalism. The text, taken from *The Idea of Justice*, pp. 388–389, tells:

‘In the troubled English summer of 1816, James Mill, the utilitarian philosopher, wrote to David Ricardo, the great political economist of his time, about the effects of the drought on agricultural output. Mill was worried about the misery that would be an unavoidable result of the drought, ‘the thought of which makes the flesh creep on one’s bones – one third of the people must die’. If Mill’s fatalism about famines and drought was striking, so was his faith in the demands of a rather simple version of utilitarian justice, geared only to reducing suffering. ‘It would be a blessing,’ Mill wrote, ‘to take them [the starving population] into the streets and high ways, and cut their throats as we do with the pigs.’ Ricardo expressed considerable sympathy for Mill’s line of exasperated thought, and like Mill (James Mill, I hasten to emphasize, not John Stuart) expressed his disdain for social agitators who try to sow discontent with the established order by telling people, wrongly, that the government can help them. Ricardo wrote to Mill that he was ‘sorry to see a disposition to inflame the minds of the lower orders by persuading them that legislation can afford them any relief.’

The main sentences of this passage are, in my opinion, those denying that the government can help people and that the legislation can afford any kind of relief, i.e., the central tenet is that government cannot do anything for starving people. There is nothing to do, there is nothing which can be done.

In particular, Ricardo’s ideas, as they are expressed in this passage, show an attitude of absolute indifference towards people being in difficult situations. Legislation cannot do anything in order to help all those who finds themselves in a difficult situation like the danger represented of starvation: the government has neither the responsibility of supporting people nor the duty of saving the lives of people, if the menace for the lives of people is represented by difficulties connected to economic questions.

Ricardo’s assertions are significative since they express the conviction that not only can the government do nothing for the suffering people, but that there should be no protesters at all, since protesters cause only illusions; suffering people simply have to die with resignation and to remain silent.

Ricardo speaks of suffering people as “lower order”, and calls protesters “social agitators”. Ricardo is speaking of lower order, i.e., of people having no rights: since these people have no rights, they can be completely ignored; there is, actually, no need to care about lower orders. One of the most common assumptions of fatalists consists in asserting that the state or the public authority cannot do anything, that there is nothing to do, and that the difficult conditions are to be accepted. Sen’s strategy in this text and in other texts consists in saying that the assertions that governments cannot do anything are not true: public authority can do, provided that public authority wants to do; famines are avoidable.

Sen's criticises Ricardo's positions in the following way (the text is taken from *The Idea of Justice*, pp. 388–389):

'(...) even though David Ricardo was perhaps the most distinguished economist in Britain of his time, the arguments of those whom he took to be mere instigators of protest did not deserve such prompt dismissal. Those who were encouraging the people threatened by starvation to believe that government legislation and policy can mitigate hunger were actually more right than was Ricardo in his pessimism about the possibility of effective social relief. Indeed, good public policy can eliminate the incidence of starvation altogether. Close investigation of famines has brought out their easy preventability and the results support the pleading of the protesters, rather than upholding the formulaic – and somewhat lazy – dismissal by pillars of the establishment of the possibility of relief. A proper economic understanding of the causation and preventability of famines, with appropriate consideration of the diversity of the economic and political causes involved, shows the naivety of a mechanically food-based view of starvation, as recent economic investigations have shown. A famine is the result of many people not having enough food to eat, and it is, by itself, no evidence of there being not enough food to eat. People who lose out altogether in the food battle, for one reason or another, can be given more market command rapidly enough, through various income-generation measures, including public employment, thus achieving a less unequal distribution of food in the economy (a means of famine prevention that is often used now – from India to Africa). The point here is not merely that David Ricardo's pessimism was unjustified, but also that contrary arguments cannot be sensibly dismissed without serious engagement. There is a requirement for public reasoning, rather than prompt rejection of contrary beliefs, no matter how implausible those beliefs might initially look and how voluble the crude and rough protests might appear. Open-minded engagement in public reasoning is quite central to the pursuit of justice.'

The most important sentence of the passage is, in my opinion, the following one:

'A famine is the result of many people not having enough food to eat, and it is, by itself, no evidence of there being not enough food to eat.'

Through the sentence a change of paradigm of interpretation is visible: famines do not depend on the lack of food; famines are connected to the incapacity of some parts of the people to buy food. Sen's main observations are the following ones:

- Good public policy can eliminate the incidence of starvation: famines are not a natural phenomenon; they have precise social causes and precise social responsibilities. If starvation happens, this means that the public policy has been not efficient.
- Famines are not the result of a general lack of food. Famines are the result of the lack of entitlements by some group of persons: because of the lack of entitlements, these persons are not able to buy food. To say that there is food shortage is an expedient for all those who say that there is nothing to do.

- The remedies to avoid famine and starvation are rather simple: they can be represented, for instance, by all income-generation measures, such as public employment; through these measures, it can be achieved that the distribution of food is more rightly distributed.

- Sen's definition of famines as a condition in which people do not have enough entitlements to buy food – and therefore not as a condition in which there is not enough food – changes the perspective of interpretation completely: if the cause of famines lies in the lack of entitlements, famines are to be considered as a social phenomenon which can be solved by a redistribution of income.

In order to avoid famines there must be the will to avoid famines; otherwise, there is nothing to do. All depends on the will or on the absence of the will to do something.

The ethical fundament of Sen's meditation is that the state has a duty to intervention: the state or the public authority may not simply observe the events, wait and see: there are situations in which a state has a precise duty to intervention.

iii) On hunger, famines and entitlements

On the prevention of famines, Sen expresses the following judgment (the text is taken from *Development as Freedom*, p. 175):

'Famines are, in fact, so easy to prevent that it is amazing that they are allowed to occur at all. The sense of distance between the ruler and the ruled – between "us" and "them" – is a crucial feature of famines.'

Famines happen when there is a distance between rulers and ruled. If rulers have no limits ruled are exposed to risks. The possibility that phenomena like famines happen is due to the possibility that rulers do not consider the opinions and the needs of the ruled; if, on the contrary, rulers must consider opinions and needs of the ruled, then they must cope with the causes of the famines.

As to the analysis of starvation, Sen expresses the following considerations (the text is taken from *Poverty and Famines*, Chapter 1, "Poverty and Entitlements", p. 1):

'Starvation is the characteristic of some people not *having* enough food to eat. It is not the characteristic of there *being* not enough food to eat. While the latter can be a cause of the former, it is but one of many *possible* causes.'

The definition of starvation, with which Sen opens his study *Poverty and Famines*, is, as such, a declaration against all the analyses presenting famines as phenomena in which there is no food at all in a country, as if, therefore, famines were unavoidable phenomena. The common doctrine is that famines are due to lack or to absence of food in a country:

- the consequence of no food at all is starvation;
- since there is no food at all, there is nothing to do against starvation.

Famines and starvations are presented to be natural phenomena, for which exclusively the bad nature is to blame, and for which there are no human responsibilities. As such the formula “no food – therefore starvation” is, in Sen’s opinion, very suspect, since it aims to conceal something: the precise political and social responsibilities for famines and starvations. The cause of starvation is, in Sen’s opinion, due to the lack of entitlements to buy food of the people who starve: famines are a problem of lack of entitlements, not a problem of lack of food as such. In fact, it can be seen through the analysis of Sen that famines and starvations involve only a precise part of a people, i.e., the part that because of different causes is not in the condition of buying food; famines do not involve the whole population of a country.

- If famines were a problem of general lack of food, they would hit the whole population;
- since only a part of a population suffers from famines, whereas the greater part of a population is not hit at all by famines, this means that in the country affected by famine there is, actually, food to be bought and eaten.
- The problem of famines has, therefore, to be interpreted as a problem of lack of entitlements – some people cannot buy food, cannot move food to themselves – and is not a problem of general lack of food.

On the distinction between ‘man-made’ famines and famines caused by nature Sen expresses precise suspects (the text is taken from *Hunger and Public Action*, Part I, “Hunger in the Modern World”, Chapter 4, “Society, Class and Gender”, Paragraph 4.1, “*Are Famines Natural Phenomena?*”, p. 46):

‘A distinction is sometimes drawn between ‘man-made’ famines and famines caused by nature. The purpose is, perhaps, to distinguish between those famines in which some kind of a natural event (e.g. a flood or a drought) causes the disaster, as opposed to a famine in which people die despite there being no such act of nature. Certainly, a distinction can indeed be made between famines in which the proximate indicator is some physical phenomenon and those in which social changes of one kind or other act as the prime mover. However, recognizing the varying role of physical nature in the development of a famine is not quite the same thing as classifying famines into ‘man-made’ and ‘nature-made’ types. That classification can, in fact, be deeply misleading. Famine is, by its very nature, a social phenomenon (it involves the inability of large groups of people to establish command over food in the society in which they live), but the forces influencing such occurrences may well include, *inter alia*, developments in physical nature (such as climate and weather) in addition to social processes. The idea that causation of famines can be neatly split into ‘natural’ and ‘man-made’ ones would seem to be a bit of non-starter.’

- No distinction between ‘man-made’ famines and famines caused by nature is legitim.

- Sen expresses a strong denial as to the legitimation of a distinction between famines which are man-made and famines caused by nature.
- Sen's suspect concerning this distinction is, among other things, that famines are presented as a kind of catastrophe, like an earthquake, against which there is nothing to do.
- This is not the case for famines, which in Sen's opinion always have precise responsible and are due to precise failures (for instance) in the organisation of the distribution of food.
- Any famine is a social phenomenon: this means that every famine finds its causes in the structure of a society, and in the government and organisation of a society in which it happens¹.
- To consider famines as social phenomena corresponds to a change of paradigm of interpretation: famines may not be seen as a natural phenomenon against which there is nothing to do.

One usual strategy in case of famines is to blame nature for the cause of the famines. Sen strongly criticises this strategy (the text is taken from *Hunger and Public Action*, Part I, "Hunger in the Modern World", Chapter 4, "Society, Class and Gender", Paragraph 4.1, "Are Famines Natural Phenomena?", p. 47):

'Blaming nature can, of course, be very consoling and comforting. It can be of great use especially to those in positions of power and responsibility. Comfortable inaction is, however, typically purchased at a very heavy price – a price that is paid by others, often with their lives.'

- Sen uncovers the political procedure of blaming nature for the coming about of famines. The strategy of blaming nature aims to present famines as unavoidable events and to shift the failures of government to the responsibility of nature. Blaming nature is a political way out of responsibilities.

- All those having power blame nature for causing famines in order to be free of responsibilities: this is a precise strategy in order to distract the attention of people².

On famines, the general considerations of Sen are the following ones (the text is taken from *Hunger and Public Action*, Part I, "Hunger in the Modern World", Chapter 4, "Society, Class and Gender", Paragraph 4.1, "Are Famines Natural Phenomena?", p. 47):

'The points of overriding importance are: that there is no real evidence to doubt that all famines in the modern world are preventable by human action; that many countries – even some very poor ones – manage consistently to prevent them; that when people die of starvation there is almost invariably some massive social failure (whether or not a natural

¹ On closer inspection, the distinction is functional to contend that at least some famines are unavoidable. At least some famines are presented as caused by natural phenomena, so that they can be presented as unavoidable. Sen aims to show that the origin of famines can be natural, but that, nonetheless, the real cause lies in the absence of an adequate answer to this origin.

² The lesson we learn is that to blame nature is an easy way out from one's own responsibility. The strategy of blaming nature regards, actually, many questions; it is not limited exclusively to the emergence of famines.



phenomenon had an initiating role in the causal process); and that the responsibilities for that failure deserve explicit attention and analysis, not evasion. There is, of course, much more to be said, but we have to say the first things first.’

- Every famine can be prevented: there is no famine which represents an unavoidable phenomenon; therefore, if a famine is not prevented, there are precise responsibilities in all those who have power.

- Poor countries too do manage to prevent famines: it is not the case that poor countries are condemned to the phenomena of famine and of starvation.

- If poor countries too can successfully solve the problem of famines, if poor countries too can avoid the emergence of famines, this means that no too great financial instruments are necessary in order to avoid famines.

- Starvation corresponds to massive social failures, no matter whether a natural phenomenon in the causal process bringing to the starvation has had a role or has not had any role. It can be that the origin of a starvation is due to a natural phenomenon; the emergence of a starvation is due to mistakes, to social mistakes having precise social responsibilities: these are not natural phenomena. Men, and not nature, are to be blamed for the emergence of famines.

- Goods as food can be moved, they are not static: if there is shortage of food in a region, food can be moved from a region where there is food to the region where there is no food; a shortage of food can affect a region, but it is extremely rare that it affects many regions.

- Responsibilities should be analysed; to blame nature for famines or to present famines as natural phenomena are a good method for avoiding the analysis of famines.

Not to be forgotten is the question of the range of the victims of the famines (the text is taken from *Hunger and Public Action*, Part I, “Hunger in the Modern World”, Chapter 4, “Society, Class and Gender”, Paragraph 4.2, “*Society and Cooperative Conflicts*”, p. 48):

‘Famines are always divisive phenomena. The victims typically come from the bottom layers of society – landless agricultural labourers, poor peasants and share-croppers, pastoralist nomads, urban destitutes, and so on. Contrary to statements that are sometimes made, there does not seem to have been a famine in which victims came from all classes of the society.’

Sen’s attention is dedicated to the bottom layers of a society: Sen’s shows that a famine does not hit a whole population, but only the bottom layers of it. Famines hit particular groups of people; they do not hit, for instance, persons with power. Only powerless persons are hit by starvation; powerful persons do not die. The analysis of the layers of the society which are affected by poverty, by famines and by starvation implies an analysis of the way in which a society is constituted.

The fact that famines always hit specific categories of the society shows that famines are not a general phenomenon. Famines hit



specific categories since these categories are more vulnerable than other categories. The emergence of famines gives elements on the structure of societies and on the way of governing these societies.

iv) On democracy

A theme which Sen deal often with is democracy and the defence of democracy; the following ones are assertions that are made by those who consider democracy a luxury that poor countries cannot afford (the text is taken from *Development as Freedom*, pp. 146–147):

‘Priority must surely be given, so the argument runs, to fulfilling economic needs, even if it involves compromising political liberties. It is not hard to think that focussing on democracy and political liberty is a luxury that a poor country “cannot afford.”’

Sen analyses the position of all those who consider democracy a luxury that cannot be afforded by poor countries, which must, on the contrary, give the priority to economic development. The point of this reasoning is that development of human rights and economic development are not mutually compatible: human rights represent a kind of hindrance for the economic development. Since priority in a poor country should be given to economic development in order to defeat poverty, human rights should be, at least temporarily, forgotten; this concept can be confirmed through the following text, taken from *Development as Freedom*, p. 147):

‘What should come first – removing poverty and misery, or guaranteeing political liberty and civil rights, for which poor people have little use anyway?’

Sen’s defence of democracy and human rights begins with the following considerations, expressed in *Development as Freedom*, p. 148):

‘I shall argue that intensity of economic needs *adds* to – rather than subtracts from – the urgency of political freedoms. There are three different considerations that take us in the direction of a general pre-eminence of basic political and liberal rights.

- 1) their *direct* importance in human living associated with basic capabilities (including that of political and social participation);
- 2) their *instrumental* role in enhancing the hearing that people get in expressing and supporting their claims to political attention (including the claims of economic needs);
- 3) their *constructive* role in the conceptualisation of “needs” (including the understanding of “economic needs” in a social context).’

Sen underlines the importance of human rights: human rights represent the fundament of political and social participation: there is no real development, no real growth of the capabilities of a person if the person does not have the possibility of political and social participation.

If a person cannot participate in political and social processes, this person suffers from a form of poverty: she is deprived of a precise



capability. Development is not only economic development, poverty is not only economic poverty. Both development and poverty involve many aspects of the life of a person (i.e., they are not limited and cannot be limited only to income). In the same way, development of a society is not only economic growth: a society in which there is economic growth, but in which freedom of expression is absent, is a society deprived of precise capabilities.

Furthermore, without human rights there is no way for people to support their own requests for the solving of particular problems: if people do not have the capability of free speech, they are deprived of the possibility of expressing their needs. Without human rights, people are deprived of the capability of denouncing any kind of problem they are affected by.

‘The opposition to democracies and basic civil and political freedoms in developing countries comes from three different directions. First, there is the claim that these freedoms and rights hamper economic growth and development. (...) Second, it has been argued that if poor people are given the choice between having political freedoms and fulfilling economic needs, they will invariably choose the latter. So there is, by this reasoning, a contradiction between the practice of democracy and its justification: to wit, the majority view would trend to reject democracy – given this choice.’ ” (*Development as Freedom*, p. 148)

Sen describes the causes of the idea that human rights are a kind of hindrance for economic developing countries. One of the causes is represented by the opinion that freedoms and rights constitute a kind of brake for economic growth; another cause is represented by the conviction that poor people prefer the solving of economic problems than the possession of political freedoms. Poor people prefer the liberation from poverty to the possession of human rights: since their priority is the liberation from poverty, poor people will always accept the sacrifice of their political rights in order to escape from poverty.

‘(...) in judging economic development it is not adequate to look only at the growth of GNP or some other indicators of overall economic expansion. We have to look also at the impact of democracy and political freedoms on the lives and capabilities of the citizens. It is particularly important in this context to examine the connection between political and civil rights, on the one hand, and the prevention of major disasters (such as famines), on the other. Political and civil rights give people the opportunity to draw attention forcefully to general needs, and to demand appropriate public action. Governmental response to the acute suffering of people often depends on the pressure that is put on the government, and this is where the exercise of political rights (voting, criticizing, protesting and so on) can make a real difference.’ (*Development as Freedom*, pp. 150-151)

The criteria through which economic development should be evaluated cannot, in Sen’s opinion, be reduced to the growth of GNP or to equivalent indicators of the economic expansion. This way of evaluation of economic development is, in Sen’s opinion, far too limited. Without



the presence of human rights, there is no way for people to express their needs. If people may not have free speech, people cannot express their needs and cannot call for an appropriate public action corresponding to their needs. The result is that very many problems present in a society are not coped with.

Sen interprets development as a process which is not limited to the increase of GNP or to the increase of income. Therefore, the contrast between development and democracy cannot be true. Without democracy, a constitutive part of development could not come about.

If a government is not subdued to the judgment of people in the form of vote, of public criticism, of public opinion, a government will not correspondingly act; on the contrary, a government will prosecute its own priorities without paying any attention at all to the needs of people. People are, without the presence of human rights, simply not heard. Democracy can represent a means in order to compel rulers to take care of ruled (the text is taken from *Development as Freedom*, pp. 180–181):

‘The causal connection between democracy and the nonoccurrence of famines is not hard to seek. Famines kill millions of people in different countries in the world, but they don’t kill the rulers. The kings and the presidents, the bureaucrats and the bosses, the military leaders and the commanders never are famine victims. And if there are no elections, no opposition parties, no scope for uncensored public criticism, then those in authority don’t have to suffer the political consequences of their failure to prevent famines. Democracy, on the other hand, would spread the penalty of famines to the ruling groups and political leaders as well. This gives them the political incentive to *try* to prevent any threatening famine, and since famines are in fact easy to prevent (the economic argument clicks into the political at this stage), the approaching famines are firmly prevented. The second issue concerns *information*. A free press and the practice of democracy contribute greatly to bringing out information that can have an enormous impact on policies for famine prevention (for example, information about the early effects of droughts and floods and about the nature and impact of unemployment). The most elementary source of basic information from distant areas about a threatening famine are enterprising news media, especially when there are incentives – provided by a democratic system – for bringing out facts that may be embarrassing to the government (facts that an authoritarian government would tend to censor out). Indeed, I would argue that a free press and an active political opposition constitute the best early-warning system a country threatened by famines can have.’

The main aspects of the passage are the following ones:

- Famines do not kill rulers; presidents, bureaucrats, bosses, military leaders, commanders and so forth do not become victims of famines. In general, all those who have power in a society do not fall prey of famines; famines always hit powerless, destitute people.

- If there is distance between rulers and ruled, ruled have diminished possibilities, or no possibilities at all, to defend their own interest or to plead for the satisfaction of their needs. If there is a free press in a country, rulers must consider ruled, since the needs of the ruled are made public; otherwise rulers can ignore the expectations of the ruled.

- If there are no control instruments of the persons that have power, such as elections, opposition parties, public criticism and so on, the person who possesses the power in a society will not have to be afraid of the consequences of their own failure: they can remain in power in presence of famines too.

- Free media have an essential role in preventing famines, since media can inform the public opinion on the menace of famines.

- Only the control which takes place in a democracy thanks to opposition parties, newspapers, public opinion, free elections and so on can compel people with power to bring about measures against famines that can successfully prevent famines.

Sen's is aware, though, that a democratic government does not represent as such the solution to all problems, as it is expressed in *The Idea of Justice*, pp. 348–349):

‘(...) We have to go beyond economic growth to understand the fuller demands of development and of the pursuit of social welfare. Attention must be paid to the extensive evidence that democracy and political and civil rights tend to enhance freedoms of other kinds (such as human security) through giving a voice, at least in many circumstances, to the deprived and the vulnerable. That is an important issue, and closely linked with democracy's role in public reasoning and in fostering ‘government by discussion’. Democracy's success in preventing famines belongs to democracy's many-sided contributions in advancing human security, but there are many other fields of application as well. (...) However, the practice and reach of democracy can be quite imperfect, as it is in India, despite the achievements that are undoubtedly present. (...) The relative weakness of Indian social policies on school education, basic healthcare, child nutrition, essential land reform and gender equity reflects deficiencies of politically engaged public reasoning and social pressure (including pressure from the opposition), not just inadequacies in the official thinking of the government.’

The following considerations on the limits of democracy are to be taken into consideration too (the text is taken from *Development as Freedom*, pp. 154–155):

‘The intrinsic relevance, the protective role and the constructive importance of democracy can indeed be very extensive. However, in presenting these arguments on the advantages of democracies, there is a danger of overselling their effectiveness. As was mentioned earlier, political freedoms and liberties are permissive advantages, and their effectiveness would depend on how they are exercised. Democracy has been especially successful in preventing those disasters that are easy to understand and where sympathy can take a particularly immediate form. Many other problems are not quite so accessible. For example, India's success in

- Sen criticises the thesis of the food availability decline as the cause of famines and of starvations.
- Persons, and not nature, are responsible for the occurring of famines.
- Sen's meditation is a real manifesto against fatalism: famines are not natural phenomena. Famines are social phenomena due to the failures of the public authority.
- Freedoms are an essential part of development.
- Democracy is necessary, but not sufficient in order to solve the problems present in a society.

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