
Collective responsibility in the workplace from a capability perspective

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Summary

The article shows how a shift in perspective results from use of the capability approach in evaluating corporate activity: instead of a narrow focus on economic development, attention is paid also to the human development dimension. The author puts forward a conception of professional development resulting from the combined exercise of different capabilities, of which she discusses three essential dimensions, namely, freedom of choice, empowerment and collective responsibility. On the basis of a case study, she analyses the forms and founding principles of collective responsibility as related to individual capabilities. She describes how these factors impact on workplace participation procedures, and outlines the principles of justice that they entail. More broadly, she shows the tensions and new challenges to trade unionism and collective action thrown up by the need to combine individual and collective voice.

Résumé

L'article montre le déplacement de perspective qu'induit le recours à l'approche par les capacités pour évaluer l'activité des entreprises: du strict développement économique à la prise en compte du développement humain. L'auteure avance une conception du développement professionnel comme résultant de l'exercice conjoint de différentes capacités dont elle discute trois dimensions essentielles: la liberté de choisir, le pouvoir d'agir et la responsabilité collective. A partir d'une étude de cas, elle analyse les formes et les fondements de la responsabilité collective mise en jeu par les capacités individuelles. Elle en relève les conséquences sur les procédures de participation dans l'entreprise et les principes de justice mis en œuvre. Plus largement, elle montre les tensions et les nouveaux défis qui en résultent pour le syndicalisme et l'action collective en vue de combiner « voice » individuelle et collective.

Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag beschreibt den Perspektivenwechsel, der sich aus der Verwendung des Ansatzes der Verwirklichungschancen für die Bewertung der Unternehmenstätigkeiten ergibt: Die Tätigkeit eines Unternehmens wird demnach nicht nur unter dem Gesichtspunkt der wirtschaftlichen Entwicklung, sondern auch der menschlichen Entwicklung bewertet. Die Autorin schlägt ein

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Konzept der beruflichen Entwicklung vor, das sich aus der gleichzeitigen Wahrnehmung verschiedener Verwirklichungschancen ergibt, und erörtert die drei wichtigsten Dimensionen dieser Chancen: Wahlfreiheit, Handlungsmöglichkeit und kollektive Verantwortung. Anhand einer Fallstudie werden die Formen und Grundlagen der kollektiven Verantwortung, die sich aus den individuellen Verwirklichungschancen ergibt, untersucht. Die Autorin erläutert die daraus resultierenden Folgen für die Partizipationsverfahren im Unternehmen sowie die Gerechtigkeitsprinzipien, die dabei angewandt werden. In einem weiteren Kontext ergeben sich daraus Spannungen und neue Herausforderungen für die Gewerkschaftsbewegung und kollektives Handeln, um individuelle und kollektive "Voice" miteinander zu verknüpfen.

Keywords

Capability, collective action, principle of justice, participation, professional development, responsibility

Use of the capability approach as a yardstick for evaluating economic activity, along the lines advocated by Amartya Sen (1999), means considering corporate activity not from the standpoint of firms' contribution to *economic* development alone but also taking account of the extent to which they further *human* development. This approach, insofar as it adopts a sometimes provocative stance quite at odds with an indicator like GDP which measures only the *monetary* value of goods and services, has evident affinities with the struggle waged by trade unions against inequality and the *human* costs entailed by the production of material wealth. Yet the trade unions can hardly be said to have welcomed the capability approach with open arms and one purpose of this article is to identify the reasons for their lack of enthusiasm. To this end, we will begin by presenting, from a capability approach standpoint, the three essential dimensions of any evaluation of human development in the workplace, namely, freedom of choice, empowerment, and collective responsibility (Zimmermann, 2011), after which we will look more closely at forms of collective responsibility from two angles intrinsic to the capability approach: the nature of individual participation in collective life, and the principles of justice. We hypothesize that it is the way in which collective responsibility is, in Sen's thought, somehow left hanging – insofar as he regards freedom as a social responsibility without fully determining the collective forms that could potentially embody such responsibility (Sen, 1999) – that is off-putting to the trade unions which are, in the world of labour, the historic guarantors invested with this responsibility. Our arguments will be underpinned by illustrations from a qualitative survey of employees' professional development that we have conducted in 13 French companies.¹

Grasping economic activity from the human development angle

In *Development as Freedom* (1999) Sen reminds us that the purpose of economic activity is not simply to produce goods and services but to contribute to the welfare of persons, and that freedom

¹ A survey conducted with Delphine Corteel and Dilip Subramanian in the framework of the European projects Eurocap: 'Dialogue Social, Emploi et Territoire, pour une politique européenne des capacités' (<http://www.idhe.ens-cachan.fr/Eurocap>) and CAPRIGHT: 'Resources, Rights and Capabilities. In Search of Social Foundation for Europe' (www.capright.eu). A total of 174 interviews were conducted between 2004 and 2009 with employees at all levels of the company hierarchy and staff delegates in the framework of observational visits lasting several weeks.

is not simply a means towards, but a purpose of, development. In opposition to the reduction of development to economic growth, he puts forward a more demanding definition that makes of development ‘a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy’. Over and above mere economic output measurable in terms of utility and monetary value, Sen argues the need to take account of social opportunities created and welfare generated. By defending the integration of economic and social development in this way, the capability approach calls for redeployment of the problematic of human beings at work, viewing them as the final purpose of economic activity. This is why the study of the possibilities and conditions of professional development constitutes a fertile entry point for posing the question of capabilities in the workplace.

But what is to be understood by professional development? From the capability standpoint professional development cannot be reduced to occupational or vocational development; it cannot be limited to an increase in skills, for it entails an extension of the employee’s freedom to work by broadening the range of roles, positions and careers open to him/her. Nor is it restricted to the notion of career development but always simultaneously includes considerations of personal development. Accordingly, professional development will be defined here from the standpoint of both personal development and career development as the outcome of the combined exercise of four capabilities: the capability of performing a job and work that one has reason to value; the capability of receiving training; the capability of participating (in the sense of having ‘voice’, i.e. expressing oneself and being heard); and finally the capability of combining private life and working life (Zimmermann, 2011: 178 ff). Each of these components can be evaluated in relation to the three constituent dimensions of capability: freedom of choice, empowerment and collective responsibility.

Freedom of choice and empowerment

The breadth of possible choices in developing one’s occupational or professional career is implicit in the conception of development from a capability standpoint. Sen establishes a distinction between choice in the sense of human capital, calculated and guided by expectations in relation to market developments, and choice in the sense of capability, which may be based on values other than utility (Sen, 1997). The capability approach encourages taking seriously the wide-ranging aims and purposes with which persons may endow work – as a source of income, source of identity and social recognition, or source of self-fulfilment and achievement – and the resulting different meanings of work – as an economic product, a human activity, and a social institution. Capabilities relate to the overall well-being of the worker, which means that they entail a broad spectrum of factors, ranging from job quality and working conditions to compatibility between professional and private life. As a result, to think at one and the same time about the economic development of the company and the development of persons at work, as proposed by Sen, requires that work be approached in its interdependence with other forms of human activity.

While market freedom is essential for Sen, this does not mean that it is sufficient. Whereas the market is characterized by negative freedom in the sense of coercion and obstacles to action, the idea of justice and well-being also defended by Sen (2009) requires, in addition, a positive form of freedom, in the sense of empowerment to act in a given situation. In other words, while the negative freedom of choice is important, it can become effective in practice only if accompanied by a form of positive empowerment to embark on the option selected.

The insistence on positive freedom, as an indispensable complement to negative freedom, is an essential aspect whereby the capability approach establishes its distance from the neoclassical economic theories and, in particular, the theory of human capital (Becker, 1975). Whereas the latter

makes the worker into the entrepreneur of his own career, responsible for the development of her skills and employability, the capability approach brings in, alongside individual responsibility, a form of social responsibility geared to facilitating equal empowerment. In order for a person to be in a position to exercise individual responsibility, Sen argues that it is necessary for that person to be able to choose between several viable options; it is thus as a condition of possibility of individual responsibility that Sen conceives also of collective responsibility, which he sees as consisting of equal access to opportunities and empowerment.

Thus, in the world of work, the capability approach entails formulation of the question of empowerment by putting the demands for quality, adoption of responsibility and skill development to which employees are subject to the test of a careful examination of the extent of choice and forms of possible empowerment to which these same employees have access within a given organization. It is in order to gather evidence regarding these aspects that the capability approach takes simultaneous account of what a person is capable of doing – that person's skills – and of the possibilities that are on offer for the person to develop and make use of these skills, in other words, the opportunities for empowerment. The distinction between skill and capability is here of paramount importance. Whereas skill designates exercise of responsibility in the work situation (Reynaud, 2001), capability designates, in addition, the means of exercising this responsibility. This distinction is based on the demands for justice and social responsibility that anchor capabilities within the collective dimension and differentiate capability from the strictly individualist logic of human capital (Sen, 1997).

The three principal dimensions of capability referred to here – freedom of choice, empowerment and collective responsibility – allow us to outline the features of a workplace that may be described as capability-enhancing (Zimmermann, 2011). Embodying the ethical notion of integration of economic and human development, the capability-enhancing workplace constitutes an ideal type, a benchmark for evaluating organizational practices, rather than an empirical species. An awareness of the differing values by which human action may be governed, coupled with enshrinement of equal empowerment as an area subject to social responsibility, is the cornerstone of this benchmark, by means of which a framework is created for identifying the sources of well-being and the causes of ill-being at work by setting the demands placed on employees – job output and acceptance of responsibility, in particular – against the organizational means made available to this end.

The non-determination of the collective

Beyond the decisive question of opportunities and extent of available resources, the capability approach enables a focus on and discussion of empowerment that take account of the factors, both individual and collective, by which it is determined. However, Sen does not himself argue on the basis of this collectively anchored empowerment, any more than he proposes a list of fundamental capabilities. While his approach is normative in that it enshrines equal freedom as a universal principle of justice, it is at the same time 'normatively incomplete'. This lack of normative completion goes hand in hand with a somewhat vague delineation of the collective for which Sen has been frequently criticized (Evans, 2002; Gasper, 2002). Even so, in opposition to Arrow's theorem establishing the impossibility of collective choices², Sen does defend the possibility of a collective

2 Arrow shows that it is impossible, within the framework of neoclassical economic theory, to define the general interest in a non-authoritarian manner. He concludes that to find rational bases of collective choices would be impossible, condemning with the same stroke welfare economics (Arrow, 1951). Sen disputes this last point by initiating a discussion on the foundations of rationality, replacing the utilitarian concept of well-being by a conception founded on human development.

choice based on justice, fairness and democracy (Sen, 1970). However, he here restricts himself to the theoretical debate, without pronouncing on any concrete procedures that might be used to underpin collective choices, thus leaving the empirical question of their constitution somehow suspended in mid-air.

Sen explicitly seeks, what is more, to justify this lack of normative completion and non-determination of the collective. The justification offered is the need to allow democracy fully to play its role and citizens, rather than the researcher, to define what they regard as the fundamental capabilities engaging the responsibility of a given collective. While this absence of completion shows the importance attached by Sen to the self-determination of persons, to the selection of their preferred standards and criteria, and to their capability for voice (Bonvin, 2008), it nonetheless does not fail to pose a problem. The lack of completion represents a problematic shortcoming for the reader in search of a theory of society that can be made directly operational; it leaves the field wide open, what is more, to instances of ambivalent appropriation that serve to confuse the capability approach. Finally, at a scientific level, the failure to substantiate or problematize the notion of the collective encourages forms of implementation focused on a *measurement* of freedom to the detriment of analysis of the social mechanisms that foster its *realization*. It may indeed be legitimately claimed that understanding of the springs of freedom matters just as much as knowledge of its scope. Yet such a claim means that one cannot rest content, as Sen does, to approach individuals through their relationships with an overarching social context, without regard for the collectives that operate between the two and which contribute to the configuration of social interactions at different levels. This is why we see the need, in order to operationalize the capability approach in the world of work, for completion of its conceptualization of freedom by a rigorous consideration of social relations and the collective props and formations that underpin individual capabilities, in other words, by granting more importance than does Sen to the manner in which individual capabilities are socially structured (Zimmermann, 2006).

Participatory collectives, representative collectives

In the workplace setting, as elsewhere, the capability to express oneself and to make one's voice heard is a prerequisite for every other capability, insofar as it is the precondition for enabling each individual to take part in the decision-making processes that influence how and what they become. Sen sees in social dialogue the privileged means whereby employees are enabled to exercise their freedom to participate in the workplace. Yet the survey we conducted suggests that the existence of such a dialogue does not actually suffice to ensure employees' capabilities for professional development in the absence of other more direct forms of participation in which all workers are able to take part in open discussion about work and to give expression to the choices that reflect their individual values as persons.³ The findings show that it is those companies that promote, in addition to social dialogue, a sense of the collective that is based on shared values other than those only linked to market demand, and which offer a forum for participation and open discussion of work-related issues, that are best in a position to promote workers' capabilities (Zimmermann, 2011). Such companies are, however, few and far between, and, among the 13 we studied, we found only one. It is in order to better understand what conditions are required for a capabilities policy to be effectively

3 Isabelle Ferreras records a similar observation in the survey she conducted in Belgium on the work of supermarket check-out operators (Ferreras, 2007).

implemented in the workplace, but also the tensions that may well be generated by such a policy, that we will now turn our attention to the company in question.

Capabilities and forms of management

At Bigtrucks, the most capability-enhancing firm within our sample, there coexist different forms of collective which prove complementary from the standpoint of employees' capabilities: participative collectives have been set up on the initiative of a participative management, while representative collectives are linked to the works council and the trade unions. Bigtrucks is a French plant that assembles heavy goods vehicles of a Swedish make. Even though the work is performed on assembly lines, it is in this firm that we found workers who assessed their work experience positively, and in some cases even told us that they enjoyed coming to work; assembly-line workers who consider that they have opportunities for professional development as well as for mobility on the local labour market. We have analysed (Zimmermann, 2011) elsewhere how a work collective can generate individual forms of empowerment, by showing the role of participative management in producing the reputation of quality that is enjoyed by every Bigtrucks employee, irrespective of skill level and position, among other local employers. In this article, our emphasis will be on the tensions between, but also the complementary features displayed by, the managerial approach to and trade union mode of structuring the collective; and on the ambivalence felt by elected delegates and trade union reps in relation to these participative collectives which simultaneously constitute a mode of company governance subject to management control while also contributing to the employees' professional development, understood in the broad sense of the four capabilities, namely, for work, training, voice, and combination of working and private life.

The organization of work at Bigtrucks is very much inspired by the Toyota lean production model, while adapted to the demands of a dedicated and small-scale production site. In order to mobilize all involved parties, the company project makes well-being in the workplace into a value that genuinely matters. This is a point stressed by the HR Director:

'The notion of sustained performance is based both on people's skills and on their sense of involvement meaning that they gain satisfaction from working for Bigtrucks, and actually feel good about going to work ...'

The outcome is what some call the 'Bigtrucks spirit', the expression of a way of being and of a sense of the collective. The 'Bigtrucks spirit' refers to a system of reciprocal involvement between employees and company by virtue of which, ideally, employees feel involved in their work while the company develops an involvement in its employees' professional development. The participative dimension is the cornerstone of this state of affairs, interlinked with a learning and training policy which we cannot, however, describe here. Participation is embodied in two specific forms of arrangement: 'delegations' and 'continuous improvement or problem-solving groups' to form part of which workers step out of the assembly line for a few hours or days each month. The tasks of delegations range from supplying the team with small tools, through the auditing of sample lorries at the end of the assembly line, to acting as factory guide for groups of visitors. The problem-solving groups, meanwhile, organize ad hoc meetings of employees from different levels of the hierarchy, from factory floor worker to director of production, in order to deal with a wide range of problems such as safety or productivity on a given section of the assembly line, adaptation of organization and working methods to a change in production model, or even friction among work-mates in a given cluster. In such cases, factory floor workers may leave the production line for

several days, or even several weeks, in order to seek, together with other colleagues, operators, managers and technicians, the most appropriate ways of dealing with the problems arising. Thus Damien (an operator on the exhaust pipe cluster) volunteered to take part in a working group set up to adapt the cluster to a change of work pace. He was assigned to this task on a full-time basis for three weeks, with one other operator, in cooperation with the foreman, the cluster methods technician and the assembly-line foreman.

The problem of responsibility

Participative management, as it is practised at Bigtrucks, is a search for answers to the challenge represented by collective conduct of action in the company through the creation of work-exchange groups that are akin to debating forums. However, the subjects up for debate are selective: the debate takes place, among those who have volunteered to take part, with a view to devising the best possible solutions to a problem that has been identified or anticipated as such by the company management. In no way does this participation encroach on the decision-making powers of the latter; and this, in the eyes of the trade union reps, entails a problem of dilution and exercise of collective responsibility.

‘The working groups appeal to participation and individual responsibility. But since their role is merely to offer advice, this gives rise to a problem from the standpoint of the exercise of collective responsibility [. . .]. The participation groups can contribute ideas, but decisions are taken at a different level. Collective responsibility is never engaged as happens in the case of collective bargaining.’ (Bruno CFDT rep)

The shift from collective to individual responsibility goes hand in hand with a transformation of the manner in which political function is exercised in the company, from a representative mode to a direct mode. The change does not affect only the method but also the very purpose of participation. This is an essential point. The employees are associated in the production of joint knowledge for the purpose of informing the decision or its implementation, but the proper use of this knowledge is, in the final analysis, left to the employer and his representatives. The trade unionist sees this form of participation as entailing a major problem:

‘In the working groups employees are asked to find a solution or an answer to a question, but they are not asked to discuss the question itself. Let me give one example. A 90 percent loading rate had been reached, and that called for a revision of standards. Everyone can agree with this.. Except that no one wanted to know from the employees what they thought, asked them to consider whether there might not be another way of becoming more competitive, other than the 90 percent loading rate. They were not asked. They were told: “we’ve reached a 90 percent loading rate and this means we have to revise the standards”. The aims are defined in advance. That is what we find it difficult to accept. And the workers are then taken in, and they agree to play the game, which makes our work all the harder.’ (Bruno CFDT rep)

Thus regarded, the role which this ‘deliberative’ form of participation is called upon to play is that of justifying a particular political decision-making set-up (Blondiaux and Sintomer, 2002), one that is endowed with democratic legitimacy through the production of an informational basis for judgement, i.e. a set of information taken into account to found the judgement, that has received collective validation (Bohman, 1997). The trade union reps are not involved in this process in any formal capacity. The deliberative participation establishes a procedure in which it is up to the

persons directly concerned to give practical meaning to the guidelines laid down by the top management. It is endowed with three complementary functions. By involving the assembly-line workers, through a process of collective thinking, in the implementation of change, participation contributes to its acceptance, to a stance of ownership rather than of opposition, thereby helping to defuse industrial conflict. Over and above this *political function*, participation has a *technical and organizational* role: it is aimed at achieving effective implementation of decisions by mobilizing the knowledge and expertise of those who actually spend their days on the assembly line. A third function that is equally important at Bigtrucks is *human and social*. Through a process of pooling of knowledge on different aspects of production, participation is a search for the best solutions that will suit, simultaneously, the different categories of employees and the management. If, in spite of these limited objectives, it has nonetheless encountered the lasting support of Bigtrucks employees, this is because their proposals are not simply solicited and noted down but are actually discussed and taken seriously, quite unlike what was observed to take place during the ephemeral episode of 'quality circles' in France.⁴ Such a practice results in a feeling of dignity and mutual respect among persons of different hierarchical levels and this is a permanent feature of the talks. Participation thus contributes to mutual knowledge and socialization within the factory, generating a sense of belonging to a production collective in which all come to feel well regarded and that their opinions count. Our interviews with employees show, what is more, that participation, by its valuing and developing of other skills, serves to lessen the tedium of repetitive labour, while also strengthening professional development capabilities and the reputation of quality accruing to the company's employees outside the factory gates. The idea that the system offers opportunities and promotes workers' professional development is defended even by trade union reps who, while criticizing the perverse side effects of participative management, are also prepared to recognize its positive effects:

'On the Bigtrucks assembly line anyone who really wants to invest in his job has openings, can develop, and get training. And Bigtrucks is also an excellent reference for anyone in search of a new job'. (Bruno CFDT rep)

What principles of justice?

Unlike representative and trade union expression, participative expression in the company has no basis in law. It derives from a citizenship of the company that is conceded by the goodwill of its management. With Dominique Martin (1994) we can distinguish 'citizenship of the company' from 'citizenship in the company' which is based on the granting of rights to employees. In the former case, the company is conceived of as an area of cooperation, as a sovereign totality, where each person is a co-entrepreneur irrespective of his/her position in the hierarchy; in the latter case, the company is understood as a mixed area in which elements of cooperation rub up against elements of conflict. Bigtrucks combines these two understandings of citizenship, the former placed under the auspices of participative management, the latter under those of representative and trade

4 Following the Auroux Laws of 1982 designed to improve workers' rights, there was a spurt of enthusiasm in France for participative management, particularly through the creation of discussion forums called 'quality circles'. The failure of this policy can be analysed as the result of the ex post superimposing of arrangements on existing organizations with scant inclination to call into question their mode of operation. Participation became restricted to areas downstream from production and limited to discussions detached from and unable to influence the reality of work (Martin, 1994).

union action. The capability-oriented policy conducted in the company is the result of this conjunction of individual and representative forms of participation. Persons are able to develop their capabilities in the potentially conflictual space between formal egalitarian rights – negotiated and consolidated in collective agreements by the staff delegates – and informal rights, i.e. moral rights of access to professional development promoted by the participative management in return for the employees' duty of commitment to their work.

Whereas collective bargaining produces formal recognition based on equal rights for all, particularly in relation to working time and pay increases (which are awarded every year in accordance with a company agreement setting a minimum and maximum threshold – in 2006 a minimum 2 percent increase for all and maximum 5 percent), participative management tends to give preeminence to a form of recognition that is founded on esteem.⁵ Whereas law creates an 'order of generality' – the same level of increase for all – esteem generates an 'order of singularities', in the form of increases based on merit. Such merit-based rewards are much in favour among the foremen, but also among the operators, but are at odds with the demand for equal treatment defended by the trade unions.

From the *opening* of the site in 1992 until 1998, the CFDT was the sole trade union confederation present in the company. In 1998 the CGC came in, on the initiative of a manager keen on defending managerial workers' rights during the period when the 35-hour week was under negotiation. In 2003 two additional new partners came in, namely, the FO and the CGT. FO's arrival was triggered by the split in the CFDT in the wake of that confederation's position in favour of the pension reform. The entry of the CGT was prompted by the local branch's desire to gain a foothold at Bigtrucks. In 2004 this confederation, prone to adopting a more offensive and adversarial trade union stance, instigated a strike linked with the change in production model, its demand relating to compensation for the changes in schedule that had been introduced by the management while the new assembly line was being run in. These changes – beginning work ten minutes earlier and finishing ten minutes later, with compensation on the last Friday of the month – were in compliance with the company agreement on annualized working time but the CGT took the view that they were detrimental to the workforce and thus required financial compensation. This claim was met, after a half-day strike, by the granting of a bonus of €50 per month for the period during which the amended schedules remained in force. However, the CGT's attempts to gain a foothold in the company, initiated by a young new recruit with support from the local branch, proved difficult, unlike that of the other trade unions whose leaders were longstanding members of the 'Bigtrucks family'. In 2004, after the short but successful strike, the CGT did not stand in the workplace elections for lack of candidates and lack of support among the workforce for a style of trade unionism that is at odds with the internal practice of social dialogue akin, in some ways, to the German 'conflictual partnership' which conceives of industrial relations as not exclusively conflict-ridden but also as offering grounds for cooperation (Müller-Jentsch, 1991).

5 The forms of recognition distinguished by Axel Honeth (1996) – love, right, and social esteem – are particularly pertinent here.

Equality and merit constitute, together with freedom, the three principles of justice that govern the sphere of labour and mould its critical space. They underpin different ways of conceiving of the collective, with each principle emphasizing a specific dimension of labour relations: ‘from the standpoint of equality, *alter* is a member of a community; from the standpoint of merit, he is a competitor; from the standpoint of autonomy, he is a subject’ (Dubet et al., 2006: 30). These principles are not mutually exclusive. At Bigtrucks, the two established modes of production of the collective, one under management control, the other under trade union control, are differentiated not by any exclusive identification with one or other mode but by the relative weight accorded to equality and merit, by the way in which the two are articulated and by the special nature of the resulting emphasis on freedom. The Bigtrucks system represents a shrewd dosage of these three principles which subtly counterbalance one another.

On the one hand, the company management supports the principle of equality as a kind of cement within the firm; on the other, the trade union reps turn individual commitment to participative management into a collective result, such that it becomes an asset in collective bargaining. While there is indeed a fundamental divergence between the trade union and the management conceptions of the collective and of what constitutes fair recognition, there thus exists the possibility of a compromise for as long as each party manages to contain the position of the other and employ it as a prop in support of its own policy.

Thus, while Bigtrucks clearly retains individualization of the labour relationship as a facet of its corporate ethos, its case is instructive insofar as it shows that an alternative scenario is possible, a third way that avoids antagonism between individualization on the one hand and collective rights and standards on the other. By means of the reputation of quality enjoyed by all its employees, Bigtrucks demonstrates in exemplary fashion that the capabilities of individuals do not exist independently of the collectives to which they belong.

The regard for the individual worker *qua* personal subject, encountered as a guiding principle within the company’s professional development policy, is combined with a sense of the collective that is borne by the representative bodies and social dialogue grounded in law, but also – and this is a decisive point for understanding this scenario and the challenges it poses for trade union action – with a renewed foundation of the collective on a basis of direct participation.

Conclusion: evaluating company practices through the capability lens: a source of ambivalence for trade union action?

Thinking in terms of capabilities invites reconsideration of collective responsibility in the workplace from both a substantive and a procedural standpoint. Most fundamentally, the capability approach raises the delicate question of how freedom, equality and merit are to be articulated as principles of justice in the workplace. Far from eluding the issue of equality, it reformulates the question of what is essentially at stake with the famous question: ‘equality of what?’ (Sen, 1973). Above equal distribution of resources, which from the capability standpoint is regarded as insufficient, it sets equal freedom of action, a prerequisite for which is the means of converting these resources into forms of empowerment regarded as of value in each individual situation. To this end, the capability approach replaces the generic and interchangeable individual, the entity that has historically formed the invariable reference point for social protection arrangements and organized collective action, by the individual subject characterized by an irreducibly singular mode of being and acting. But the figure of the singular individual also forms the fulcrum for the management strategies aimed at calling into question the existing collective arrangements – hence its ambivalence.

This ambivalence is not, however, sufficient reason to keep the value to be accorded to the person, with his/her singularity and freedom, at a remove from the trade union register. *One of the urgent challenges* lies, rather, in the need for the trade unions to position themselves on this terrain, so as to articulate the semantics of the singular individual with a sense and a policy of the collective. The capability approach offers a possible scenario to this end in that it brings freedom and individual empowerment under the auspices of social responsibility, albeit leaving open the question of how precisely this responsibility is to be attributed and exercised.

If it is considered, in accordance with what our survey findings would seem to suggest, that a capabilities policy in the workplace cannot be satisfied with representative collectives as its fulcrum but requires also participatory collectives able to open up a forum for exchange and the constitution of a common fund of knowledge concerning work, then a *second challenge* is to combine the representative logic embodied by trade unions with more direct forms of work participation which do not, however, inevitably have to be placed under management control. In order to make freedom and professional development into sources for securing individual career paths (Caillaud and Zimmermann, 2011), the capability approach and the valuing of the singular individual that is its hallmark call for a renewal of the forms of collective action (Supiot, 2010: 139 ff) that will enable individual voice to take its place alongside collective voice.

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