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Francesco Laruffa, University of Geneva  
[francesco.laruffa@unige.ch](mailto:francesco.laruffa@unige.ch)

Title:

Social justice, the conceptualization of poverty and its policy implications: a capability perspective

Abstract (500 words):

This paper is concerned with how different theories of social justice inform the conceptualization of poverty and the policies to tackle it. Over the last decades, both theories of and policies against poverty have shifted away from narrow distributive concerns focused merely on material resources. While normative political theories – especially from critical and feminist traditions – have highlighted lack of recognition, voice and participation as fundamental aspects of social injustice, at policy level emphasis has been increasingly placed on the lack of opportunities – especially those linked with the labour market – as a central dimension of disadvantage. For example, the conceptualization of poverty at the EU-level – evident in the indicators used to measure it – focuses not only on low income and material deprivation but also on exclusion from (and unfavourable inclusion in) the labour market. Correspondingly, welfare states have been encouraged to become more “employment-friendly” (through activation and “human capital investments”) instead of simply distributing income and goods to the poor. The capability approach has been often invoked as a normative justification for these policy developments that shifted the emphasis away from access to commodities and towards life chances and opportunities. Yet, these dominant interpretations of the capability approach face three risks. First, they often too quickly dismiss the importance of material resources for leading a “good life”, neglecting redistribution. The goal of “empowering” the poor may then take precedence over reducing their deprivation (e.g. when welfare benefits are reduced with a view to “activating” unemployed people). Second, capabilities are framed narrowly as employment opportunities, disregarding the freedom to engage in other valuable activities, such as care work and community involvement. Third, the aspects linked to voice and participation (those that are present also in the feminist and critical literature on social justice) are marginalized, leaving unexplored the most radical implications of this approach for theorizing disadvantage – and for formulating policies addressing it.

The aim of the paper is to propose a capability-based normative framework for the conceptualization of poverty and disadvantage, which emphasizes three different dimensions: lack of resources (income poverty and material deprivation); lack of valuable life chances (within and beyond employment); and lack of real opportunities to participate in the co-determination of the shape of society and in influencing the direction of social change. Focusing on the EU as an example, I argue that the third dimension of disadvantage – the difficulty to influence the political agenda – is often the root-cause of the other two. In this perspective, “political poverty” comes to the fore. Symmetrically, political empowerment is a crucial means for helping individuals to live the life they “have reason to value” not only because political decisions shape the kind of society in which citizens live but also because democratic participation enables deliberation on what is “valuable” in the first place. Hence, policies aimed at promoting capabilities should focus not only on the redistribution of resources and on emancipation (and thus life chances) but also on democratization, equalizing political and epistemic power within society, including within social policy itself.