**Other Books in Review**


This can seem an odd, strange book. It is not especially strange in the context of Martha Nussbaum's ongoing championing of universalist ways to capture the human condition and respond to it (as in her *Quality of Life*, co-edited with Amartya Sen). Its base in philosophy, however, is seemingly strange for a gender and development context, even though we know that work in this vein has influenced the UNDP Human Development reports for 1993–95, even though this volume was the United Nation's University/World Institute for Development Economics Research (WIDER) contribution to the Beijing conference of 1995.

It may not startle universalists to read Nussbaum's admonition that we "focus on what is common to all, rather than on differences . . . and to see some capabilities and functions as more central, more at the core of human life, than others" (p. 63). Implicit in many World Bank and IMF prescriptions is precisely the assumption of a potentially common process of modernization to which all can aspire through correct macroeconomic policy. Yet the directness of Nussbaum's admonition, the earnest way she presents a proposal that "is frankly universalist and 'essentialist'" (p. 63), might cause even the modernizationists to pause; alternately, her comments might seem to them eccentric, quixotic in the effort to prove a theorem about basics of development that they take for granted.

For those who partake of various post-developmental or post-modern perspectives, Nussbaum's admonitions read as jar-ringly retrogressive, a backlash against the challenges of hard-won difference politics, against efforts to variegate development by taking into account local considerations, against efforts to question modern "development" as a concept and aim. To say one is universalistic and essentialist in a postmodern, late-modern era seems strange, albeit such assertions can be one way to force the lamented impasse in development theory out of its lethargy or market-driven complacency.

There are other strange aspects of this book. Irrespective of one's camp in development studies, but particularly if one is doing macroeconomic analysis, how often does one draw on Aristotle and Plato? When have the mostly social scientists among us last considered Rousseau and Kant in a development context or Rawls, Nozick and Dewey? In this collection, crusty white western male philosophers are trotted out in large numbers to comment on the possibility of thinking about and devising measures of universal human capabilities—which development policies can then target and realize. It is strange for nonphilosophers to see those names here, in "our" social science realm and peculiar that a book of essays on gender and development should be debating the fine points of Aristotelian social democracy.

Another oddity: the collection abounds with prominent women, but relatively few women's names are called up by contributors to aid in the quest to define the human. Most of the collection's essays are after a humanist theory of justice rather that a feminist or cultural theory of justice. Ruth Anna Putnam exemplifies this effort when she says: "I can see no natural stopping point once we step on the slippery slope of de-
manding communally anchored theories of justice” (p. 330). Her view is that local communities have often been notorious for endangering women’s existence. Certainly this is the case. But that view can also mean that the feminist “community” must be brought into “a” new theory of justice, into a realm where most reference points—as many a feminist fears—have been honed by mostly male philosophers. In a book on women, culture and development, some of the authoritative inclusions and some “special interest” or communitarian exclusions seem peculiar indeed.

Nussbaum’s chapter, “Human Capabilities, Female Human Beings,” is the star of the collection: nearly all contributors comment on it or use it as the basis for their own discussions. It refers to empirical cases described in the first chapter by Martha Chen, called “A Matter of Survival: Women’s Right to Employment in India and Bangladesh,” as it lays out premises about the general nature of human capabilities. Nussbaum starts her trenchant comments with little ado: “Begin,” she says, “with the human being: with the capacities and needs that join all humans, across barriers of gender and class and race and nation” (p. 61). Some might wince at what sounds like the ultimate beginning, middle, and end. Nussbaum is just warming up. She recognizes the criticisms that will be raised by difference feminists. She reminds us, though, that Sen has fruitfully used the concept of human capability, Susan Okin has called for humanist justice, and the more radical Catharine McKinnon has lamented the historical location of women outside the category of the human. She calls attention to the probable dismay of anti-essentialists at her line of thinking and then tells three “true” tales to illustrate the pitfalls of what she calls relativist thinking. One concerns an American economist who cannot bring himself to label unsavory practices in rural India unjust. A French anthropologist laments the ways smallpox vaccinations in India eradicated the cult of Sittala Devi, and a radical economist takes issue with the notion of freedom of choice in a Japanese context. Her examples are crisp warnings about the type of extreme thinking that can refuse similarities by deifying and relativizing differences. But her riposte is too short and too reductionist to do “justice” to complex bodies of knowledge with which she disagrees.

Nussbaum warns the reader not to abuse the notion of the human being; avoid developing it in sexist ways; do not apply it “unjustly and prejudicially” (p. 62). She wants us to bear in mind real rather than hypothetical women as we start philosophically at the human level, for only then can claims for justice be made “on behalf of the huge numbers of women in the world who are currently being deprived of their full ‘human development’” (pp. 62–63). Development discourse to date, she claims, has been hampered by disregard for philosophical debates on relativism and universalism in ethics and science. It is thought that universalism is simply “the legacy of Western conceptions of ‘episteme,’ that are alleged to be in league with imperialism and oppression” (p. 67) (the postcolonialists here join all the others with rapped knuckles). Universalism, rather, has a long and distinguished place of consideration in philosophy, a place that can free us from the expectation that to be universal is to be ahistorical, to engage in biological determinism, to bring closure to arguments about culture. I am not inclined toward “universalist essentialism” myself, but am willing to give her a read. Something is obviously awry in development theorizing these days. Maybe what has gone missing is philosophy.

This is her account of the essentials of human life: mortality, a human body, hunger and thirst, need for shelter, sexual desire, mobility, capacity for pleasure and pain, cognitive capability, helpless extended infancy, practical reason, sociability, humor