

## BOOK REVIEW

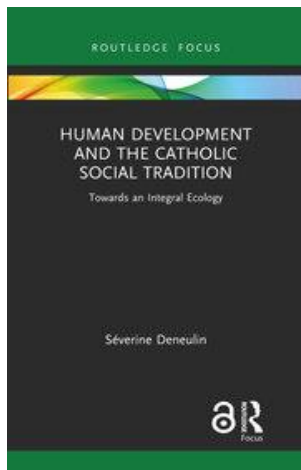
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# Human Development and the Catholic Social Tradition: Towards an Integral Ecology

*By Severine Deneulin*

Reviewed by Jonathan Warner

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This book is concerned with developing and deepening our understanding of human development. Two main chapters address what development is and what it means to live a fully human life. A third chapter offers suggestions for the future of development thought and practice. For *CRDA* readers, Severine Deneulin's book will help us engage with Roman Catholic social thought (CST), which arises from papal encyclicals from the past 130 years. She elegantly demonstrates how these ethically rich documents can complement one of today's main development paradigms, Amartya Sen's capability approach to human development.

Over the past thirty years, there has been a big shift in the way development policy is conceptualized. Following the publication of Sen's seminal *Development as Freedom* in 1999, key development actors shifted their focus from increasing GDP (based on Modernization theories of the 1950's) towards expanding the opportunities of real people to live valuable lives, or, as Sen famously says, "a life one has

reason to value" (1999, 74). Sen's capability approach (CA) became highly influential in policy circles - the UK's Department for International Development (DfID), set up to use the money from meeting the UNDP target of 0.7% of GDP going to the Global South, used it as a guide to decide which projects to support. The change is evident in a shift away from grand projects such as harnessing hydroelectric power and towards capacity building, in such areas as health, education, and poverty-reduction. Expanding opportunities is a good in itself, as well as an instrumental good in promoting growth in output and income. The focus of the CA is on enhancing what are termed "positive freedoms" - what someone is able to do - rather than negative freedoms - freedom from constraints, of the type more associated with Milton and Rose Friedman's 1980 book, *Free to Choose*. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the successor Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) cohere well with the CA.

CST has its origins in the Roman Catholic Church's belated response to changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution. It draws on a number of papal encyclicals (letters from the Bishop of Rome to his flock and the wider church) that outline principles for social action. The foundational encyclical of CST, *Rerum Novarum* (*Of New Things*)<sup>1</sup>, which was promulgated in 1891, has shaped the subsequent literature, either explicitly (as in the fortieth- and hundredth-year anniversary documents, *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) and *Centesimus Annus* (1991) respectively) or in encyclicals that pick up on one or more themes in these documents. While these documents are not well-known among Protestant Christians, they are compatible with much of Protestant Christianity's theology of life in society, especially the development theologies of Bryant Myers, Brian Fikkert, and the Lausanne Covenant, to name a few. Among their most basic principles are human dignity, solidarity, and the common good. Unsurprisingly, these are foundational

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<sup>1</sup> Encyclicals are typically referred to by the first words of their Latin text.

for many Catholic relief and development organizations.

Deneulin's book draws together the literatures on the capabilities approach and Catholic social thought, demonstrating how each can inform and enrich the other. For example, there are three well-known criticisms of the CA. First, some argue that the CA is underspecified. Sen has said that he is not attempting to produce a complete theory of justice to rival that of John Rawls; instead, he is more interested in keeping open what a "life one has reason to value" (Sen 1999, 74) might actually look like in detail. Sen's view differs significantly from Martha Nussbaum's rival conception of the CA, which she dubs the "capabilities approach." Whereas Sen prefers to keep things more general and thus prefers the more ambiguous modifier "capability," in her *Women and Human Development* (2000) Nussbaum famously proposes a list of ten specific capabilities that she contends are necessary for a fulfilling life. But Nussbaum's approach highlights a second criticism, that, at base, the CA is too focused on persons as individuals. This is also true of Sen's approach – it is the individual's assessment of a life that counts. The role of social capital and community in general is downplayed. In fact, so far, attempts to include group or community capabilities within either the Sen or Nussbaum frameworks have not been very successful. As Deneulin argues, CST, with its emphasis on seeking the Common Good, helps address this deficiency, both in terms of the importance of relations between individuals and community, and in fleshing out an account of human flourishing beyond just what the individual person finds valuable. The third criticism is that while the CA implicitly acknowledges the value of the natural environment (as a prerequisite for valuable life), CST, particularly under the reign of Pope Francis (drawing on his canonized 12/13th century namesake, Francis of Assisi) has noted and expounded on the non-human parts of the biotic creation.

CST helps address each of these three criticisms, but Deneulin points out that the direction of influence goes the other way as well, for there is much that CST can learn from the CA. For example, the CA is a firm advocate of human agency and of the idea that one's choosing something has value in itself; but this is not a major feature of CST, which could usefully integrate this idea.

The third chapter expands the scope of the argument by examining two areas of special concern to the author. The first is the environment and the non-human parts of creation. Recent encyclicals, especially *Laudato Si!* (*Praise be!*) in 2015), have picked up on the idea of the earth being our common home, and have laid out some principles for appropriate environmental care. At over 37,000 words in the English version, *Laudato Si!* appears to be the longest official

contribution to CST, indicating both Francis's concern about the issue and his desire to produce a well-developed set of ideas capable of gaining traction beyond the Roman Catholic Church. Second, Deneulin is concerned about gender issues, which have not, to date, been a focus of CST. The CA, on the other hand, is highly oriented toward acknowledging the full humanity of all genders, and especially women in Global South contexts. For CST, it does not help gender equality that much of the language of recent encyclicals is still gendered – perhaps best illustrated by the title of Francis's 2020 letter, *Fratelli Tutti* (*Brothers All*), even though it is clear from context that he is referring to all people. Similarly, encyclicals that used to be addressed to those in communion with the Pope (Roman Catholics and a few others, such as Lebanese Maronites) are now addressed to "men [sic] of good will."

In summary, Deneulin's book provides readers with an accessible introduction to and contextualization of CST. In addition, the inclusion in the CST framework of environmental issues that Deneulin spells out has great value for everyone thinking through Christian approaches to climate change and concern for those likely to be affected by it. This is surely a part of what human flourishing means.

## References

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