

Social analysis and the capabilities approach: a limit to Martha Nussbaum's universalist ethics

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Postcolonial theorists critique modernist universalisms for legitimating structural power. Responding to these critiques, Martha Nussbaum argues that abandoning universalism leads to ethical relativism. Adapting Amartya Sen's capabilities approach, she has proposed a modified universalism that draws on cross-cultural conversations as a non-ethnocentric basis for universal judgment and intervention. This paper takes as its point of departure Nussbaum's (mis)reading of a critique by Nkiru Nzegwu. Working from that conversational failure, the paper identifies the social analysis Nussbaum deploys as a point of ethnocentric breakdown in her universalist approach.

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1. Introduction

Postcolonial scholars ask how analysis and judgement work across differences of culture and power.¹ They locate the consolidation of ideas about the 'modern' West and 'traditional' non-West in the dynamics of colonial and neocolonial dominance, and show that certain characteristic 'Western' ways of talking about and representing the non-West are better understood as ideological projections than as knowledge about specific people and places.² Going further, postcolonial scholars argue that a certain complex of ideas, variously labelled as liberalism, modernism, essentialism or universalism, are better

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¹ For an introduction and overview of postcolonial thought relevant to economics, see Charusheela and Zein-Elabdin (2003), Zein-Elabdin and Charusheela (2004).

² For discussion of ethnocentric modernism in the project of development, see Escobar (1995). For discussion of ethnocentrism and orientalism in feminist development projects, see Mohanty (1991) and Spivak (1999). For examples of critical scholarship in feminist economics, see Barker (1998), Charusheela (2001, 2003), Charusheela and Zein-Elabdin (2003) and Olmsted (2004).

understood as the self-constituting ideologies of a dominant group than as altruistic, impartial bases for knowledge and judgment.¹

In response to these and other critiques of ethnocentric universalism, Martha Nussbaum argues that abandoning liberal universalism leads to moral relativism.² She accepts the criticism of certain universalisms (such as the naive asocial rationalism of neoclassical economics), but contends critics are wrong to believe that these defects are endemic to universalism. She argues that the universalist project of political liberalism can be salvaged by constructing universals more carefully. To do this, she has developed a modified universalism based on Amartya Sen's capabilities approach with, she claims, safeguards against the ethnocentric disrespect and paternalism that marked previous forms of universalist thinking.³

As one of those safeguards, Nussbaum set up cross-cultural conversations with scholars and activists across the globe. This paper takes as its point of departure the failure of a conversation between Nussbaum and Africanist feminist philosopher Nkiru Nzegwu, one of the scholars she invited to contribute to this dialogue. I use Nzegwu's contribution, alongside Nussbaum's misinterpretation of it, to excavate the central role of *social analysis* in Nussbaum's approach. Social analysis, as used here, refers to cognitive frameworks used to understand and analyse society, including ontological and epistemological presuppositions about the nature of the social world. This paper shows that Nussbaum's framework does not avoid ethnocentrism, but simply shifts it into social analysis.

To make my critique, I first set out Nussbaum's framework, with particular attention to how she seeks to guard against ethnocentrism (Section 2). Next, I pull out the framework's implicit social analysis (Section 3). The following sections (Sections 4 and 5) track the failure of the Nussbaum–Nzegwu interchange. These sections demonstrate the failure of Nussbaum's guards against ethnocentrism and pinpoint the location of that failure. Finally, Section 6 further draws out the implications of the implicit assumptions in Nussbaum's social analysis.

2. Nussbaum's universalist framework

In her search for a non-ethnocentric universalism, Nussbaum asks whether there exists an approach that is both robust enough to provide universal ethics, yet flexible enough to ensure that we avoid the racism, ethnocentrism, orientalism and paternalism of discredited universalisms. She argues that the capabilities approach pioneered by Amartya Sen fits the bill. In this framework (see Sen 1981, 1985A, 1985B, 1992, 1993),⁴ *entitlements* are the set

¹ The complex of power postcolonial scholarship examines is not limited to a simple West/non-West binary, but includes the problematics of nativist nationalism, patriarchy and class. Postcolonial critiques are neither a blanket endorsement of 'native' traditions, nor a naive assertion that people with a given cultural horizon are incapable of understanding those with different languages, religions and national histories. For a clarification of postcolonial thought's position on questions of ethical universalism, see Appiah (1997). For an elaboration of postcolonial perspectives on social analysis and ethics, see Charusheela (2004).

² Nussbaum (1992, 1993, 1995B, 1999, 2000A, 2003A, 2003B). These works also provide extensive references to the larger body of her work in which her critique of anti-essentialist approaches and her defense of universalism are developed. For an alternate understanding of the proclivity of Western scholars to lapse into relativism when their ethnocentric universalisms become unmoored, see Charusheela (2001).

³ My focus in this paper is on Nussbaum's approach, rather than Sen's.

⁴ This is a very schematic outline of the framework. In Sen's development of this framework over time (see, e.g., Sen, 1999), the relations between entitlements and functionings and capabilities are much more fluid, especially as he has sought to incorporate issues of agency.

of things a person can access or command given their current rights and opportunities. Entitlements set the level of functionings and capabilities a person may enjoy. *Functionings* are the actual combinations of things a person may value doing or being—such as having enough food to eat, getting a job or reading a book. *Capabilities* are alternate combinations of functionings that a person can achieve.¹ The purpose of public policy is to secure and extend entitlements so that everyone's set of capabilities includes such basic functionings as health, good nutrition, adequate shelter and dignity.

Because it focuses on the feasible functionings and capabilities of individuals in a given context, says Nussbaum, this approach can provide a situationally sensitive, contextual mode of making ethical judgments and interventions. Further, by sharply distinguishing between functionings and capabilities, the approach allows universalists to both promote social good *and* leave open the particular ways in which individuals may use that good, avoiding the pitfalls of a homogenising paternalism.²

However, listing a set of functionings and capabilities to be promoted by public policy is not universalist enough (Nussbaum, 1995A, p. 5):

The capability view is in principle compatible with cultural relativism—with, that is, the view that the proper criteria for ethical and political choice are those given in each culture's traditions. It would always be possible to construct culturally varying lists of the most important functions and the associated capabilities, and to measure the life quality of individuals against such standards in each society. That, however, is not the direction in which the capability view has been developed by Sen and others . . . Instead, the view has taken a stand, indeed an increasingly specific stand, on what functions of human beings are most worth the care and attention of public planning, the world over . . . This universalist non-relative aspect of the view needs further development, however, if it is to prove possible to answer the legitimate worries of those who have seen all too much paternalistic imposition of some people's ways upon others.

Thus, Nussbaum's concern is to develop philosophical underpinnings for a universal list. In this project she draws on Aristotelian conceptions (see Nussbaum, 1992, 1993) of human nature and human experience, which, she argues, incorporate caring and connection as well as attention to local context—features that are absent in the rationalist Cartesian forms of universalist essentialism and whose absence has allowed some essentialist universalist approaches to be critiqued as androcentric and masculinist. She links the Aristotelian concepts to Marxian insights, which see human social and personal experience emerging out of social interaction.³ Nussbaum contends that this broad ontology, with its attention to caring and social interaction, is both universalist enough to form the basis for a trans-social approach to human nature, yet flexible enough to be adapted to the great diversity of local contexts that shape people's lived experiences.

¹ Thus, the presence of a social welfare state makes it *possible* for a poor woman to leave her current domestic arrangement (a capability). We can promote this without taking a position on whether leaving her current arrangement is something she should do. The distinction between functionings and capabilities allows us to focus public policy on expanding capabilities (or options) without requiring the individual to necessarily inhabit one or other functioning out of the feasible set of options.

² The discussion here draws most heavily on Nussbaum (2000A), since, as Nussbaum herself notes: 'Only in *Women and Human Development (WHD)*, published in the spring of 2000, have I made any attempt to synthesize the approach and provide an overview of it, together with at least some discussion of its philosophical justification' (Nussbaum, 2000B, p. 103).

³ Though Nussbaum draws a link to Marx, his specific conception of exploitation as developed in *Capital*, and its concomitant critique of political liberalism as a means to actually attain the ethical promise of his vision, are not part of Nussbaum's analysis—see further discussion of this point in note 1 (page 12 of this article).

Going further, Nussbaum argues that there remain limits to the framework as developed by Sen, when considered from the perspective of a universalist ethic (Nussbaum, 2003A, p. 35):

Not surprisingly, I endorse these [Sen's] arguments. But I think that they do not take us very far in thinking about social justice. They give us a general sense of what societies ought to be striving to achieve, but because of Sen's reluctance to make commitments about substance (which capabilities a society ought most centrally to pursue), even that guidance remains but an outline.

Thus, as the next step in the development of this framework, Nussbaum uses the Aristotelian vision to ground a specific conception of the core features of human experience that let us identify the basic functionings that we will agree are universal, that is, essential for each individual to have in their capabilities set, regardless of their social location or cultural background. These key functionings are also called *central human functional capabilities* (or simply functional capabilities) in Nussbaum's approach.

Her process for generating this list is explicitly cross-cultural: what, asks Nussbaum, are the functionings through which *all* societies and cultures evaluate human life? This question has three parts. First, what are the functionings that all societies use to recognise themselves and others as functioning as *human*? Second, what are the functionings through which all societies assess the functioning of peoples as at an *adequate* level of human experience, in an ethical sense? Finally, having discerned those functionings we demarcate as universal based on the above principles, Nussbaum adds the concept of a 'threshold'—a minimum level for each of the functionings identified in her approach that needs to be available for each person conceived as an individual, and an end in his or her own right.

This third step, of adding a threshold, is Nussbaum's effort to answer a question that Sen's perspective does not address (Nussbaum, 2003A, p. 35):

And they [the arguments coming from Sen's approach] give us no sense of what a minimum level of capability for a just society might be. The use of capabilities in development is typically comparative merely, as in the *Human Development Reports* of the UNDP. Thus, nations are compared in areas such as health and educational attainment. But concerning what level of health service, or what level of educational provision, a just society would deliver as a fundamental entitlement of all its citizens, the view is suggestive but basically silent.

This process produces a list of ten central human functional capabilities. Nussbaum (2000A, pp. 78–80) discusses each in detail; the list is reproduced in other publications by Nussbaum (2003A, 2003B). The list (as it currently stands) includes: (i) life; (ii) bodily health; (iii) bodily integrity; (iv) senses, imagination and thought; (v) emotions; (vi) practical reason; (vii) affiliation; (viii) other species; (ix) play; and (x) control over one's political and material environment. Nussbaum argues that all items on the list are valuable in themselves and should not be traded off against each other. Social ethics, and a society's practices, are to be assessed based on how well each member of society manages to attain these functional capabilities.

Indeed, Nussbaum contends that one can think of capabilities as fundamental political entitlements (Nussbaum, 2003A). She claims that the capabilities framework, as developed by her, provides a clearer way of thinking about rights (2003A, p. 37):

Regarding fundamental rights, I would argue that the best way of thinking about what it is to secure them to people is to think in terms of capabilities. The right to political participation, the right to religious free exercise, the right of free speech—these and others are all best thought of as secured to people only when the relevant capabilities to function are present. In other words, to secure a right to citizens in these areas is to put them in a position of capability to function in that area.

Nussbaum takes care to ensure that this universalist ethic is sensitive to cultural difference. Nussbaum (2003A) describes six ways in which she has worked toward this end. First, she continues to view the list as flexible, ‘open-ended and subject to revision’. Second, the items on the list are specified in abstract and general ways, so as to leave room for local interpretations. Third, the list is viewed as a free-standing ‘partial moral conception’, that is, ‘it is explicitly introduced for political purposes only, and without any grounding in metaphysical ideas of the sort that divide people along the lines of culture and religion’ (p. 42). Thus, people can connect such a list to their own religious or secular comprehensive doctrines in their own ways. Fourth, Nussbaum maintains a strong division between capabilities and functionings that should, in principle, avoid the problem of ethnocentric control: By focusing on capabilities (focusing on the *ability* to attain these key functionings by ensuring they enter the capabilities set of each individual) rather than specific functionings (focusing on whether an individual actually *chose* this functioning out of the capabilities set), we should be able to intervene in ways that leave room for diversity and freedom of choice.¹ Fifth, she argues that the major liberties that protect pluralism are themselves items on her list (she highlights freedom of speech, freedom of association and freedom of conscience). And finally, she argues for a strong distinction between justification and implementation—that is, she holds the list as a basis for persuasion, ‘but I hold that military and economic sanctions are justified only in certain very grave circumstances involving traditionally recognized crimes against humanity’ (2003A, p. 43).

To ensure contemporary trans-social applicability of the emergent approach, Nussbaum invited a number of non-Western scholars to assess the applicability of the approach to a variety of settings in *Women, Culture and Development* (Nussbaum and Glover, 1995). Whether the issues raised by scholars in that early engagement had an impact on the way the universalist approach was deployed will be a key question for this paper. To get at this, the next section is devoted to pulling out the social analysis embedded in Nussbaum’s development of her approach. With that background, we will then return to the question of the impact of cross-cultural conversations on Nussbaum’s universalist approach.

3. The role of social analysis in Nussbaum’s approach

Since the list of central human functional capabilities is only a general guide to ethical practice, one must still determine how individuals can attain capabilities in a specific social context. This requires a *social analysis* of how a society is organised and functions. This analysis in turn grounds a discussion of what social institutions and practices need to be changed in order to ensure that every individual attains these functional capabilities.

¹ In Nussbaum’s approach, the distinction between functionings and capabilities is drawn more sharply than in Sen’s. Nussbaum understands poststructuralist critics of universalism as making a plea for diversity and for freedom of choice. She accepts the intrinsic (but not overarching) value of social and cultural diversity, and agrees that we need to ensure that efforts to promote the universal good do not slide into a project of homogenisation in the name of doing what is best for people. Thus, her aim is to construct a universalism that would not limit the scope for particularist diversity in its *expression*. The distinction between functionings and capabilities is the key place where she locates the possibility for intervention without it becoming a form of paternalistic control or requiring homogenisation. But unlike Sen, who addresses the issue of paternalism via a distinction between wellbeing and agency, Nussbaum prefers to address concerns about agency through the lens of freedom of choice, as she fears that Sen’s approach can lead back to welfarism.

To examine the social analysis that lies behind Nussbaum's applications of the universal framework, it is necessary to move from its abstract shape to a specific application. Since Nussbaum claims that the merit of her system can be shown in the contextual fluidity of its application to specific places, this move is essential for exploring the universality, or lack thereof, of her approach. For the purposes of focusing discussion in this paper, I have selected the capability of literacy. This selection is dictated both by the specific debate between Nussbaum and one of her non-Western interlocutors used as the point of departure for my argument (discussed in the next two sections), and by the fact that this capability should represent strong ground for Nussbaum: literacy is not, in general, controversial, and in her lead article for the 2003 *Signs* special issue on gender and globalisation, Nussbaum emphasises women's education, especially literacy, as the key task for feminism today. But though I develop my argument via the example of literacy, the general point about the role of social analysis made here would apply to *any* effort to give shape to and apply the capabilities approach to a specific place and time.

Literacy enters Nussbaum's approach in three principal ways. First, it enters the universal list under the central human functional capability of senses, imagination and thought, described as 'Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason—and do these things in a "truly human" way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education, including, but by no means limited to, literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training. . . .' (Nussbaum, 2000A, p. 78, quotation marks in original).

Second, literacy is linked to the central functional capability of control over one's material environment (see Nussbaum, 1995A, 2000A, pp. 283–297, 2003B). In the capabilities approach, this includes 'having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others' (Nussbaum, 2000A, p. 80). In her 2003 article on women's education, Nussbaum links literacy to women's employment: 'If there was a time when literacy was not a barrier to employment, that time has passed. The nature of the world economy is such that illiteracy condemns a woman (or man) to a small number of low-skilled types of employment' (Nussbaum, 2003B, p. 332). Because literacy opens the door to better jobs, it permits women to attain numerous other advantages associated with higher incomes (Nussbaum, 2000A, 2003B): 'These concrete factors suggest some less tangible connections. Literacy (and education in general) is very much connected to women's ability to form social relationships on a basis of equality with others and to achieve the important social good of self-respect' (Nussbaum, 2003B, p. 335).

Third, Nussbaum connects literacy to political activity: if women in particular want to organise in pursuit of political or institutional change, the ability to read and write is of practical value. Literacy is (Nussbaum, 2003B, p. 333) also 'connected to the ability of women to meet and collaborate with other women', especially in larger political movements. It 'enhances women's access to the political process' and facilitates their 'access to the legal system' (p. 334).

All of these arguments rest on implicit *social analyses*. Specifically, they assume the existence of a layer of institutions that organise the production of knowledge and culture, and assume that literacy is needed to engage with those institutions. To fully think, reason, and use one's senses one must be literate, and literate *in ways appropriate to those institutions*. These assumptions deny even the *possibility* that 'literacy' has been used, and indeed organised via these institutions, to exclude subaltern groups and privilege educated elites.¹

¹ See Benedict Anderson (1983) for a discussion of the role of literacy in constituting the homogeneous citizenry of a nation's 'imagined community' via the consolidation of languages and literatures. See Walter Mignolo (1995) for a discussion of the role of literacy in marking off distinctions between 'native' and 'civilised' in the European renaissance, and in justifying European territorial expansion and colonisation.

Thus, at the heart of Nussbaum's approach is a social analysis that makes strong assumptions about how the institutions of state and civil society operate. To point out this leap in logic is not to deny that Nussbaum's implicit analysis may be correct for certain places and times, and it is certainly not to deny that literacy, just like mathematical knowledge or an appreciation of music or an understanding of foreign languages, is a good thing in itself. But Nussbaum is making an argument about literacy in terms of its universally emancipatory role in the contemporary world, and because of the universality of the claim being made, providing a universal social analysis of the causes for women's failure to flourish in the contemporary social world.

It is this central issue of social analysis—and the concomitant question of what type of social analysis we use—that, I argue, postcolonial theory foregrounds for us. To get there, we now turn to a conversation that was initiated as part of Nussbaum's effort to guard against ethnocentrism.

4. Nkiru Nzegwu's 'Recovering Igbo traditions': an alternate social analysis

To guard against ethnocentrism, Nussbaum drew on a diversity of voices in developing her framework (Nussbaum, 1995A, p. 6). Among these voices is that of Africanist feminist philosopher Nkiru Nzegwu, whose 'Recovering Igbo traditions: a case for indigenous women's organizations in development', is the final article in Nussbaum and Glover's 1995 edited volume, *Women, Culture, and Development*. To pin down the failure of communication between Nzegwu and Nussbaum it will be necessary to establish the core elements of Nzegwu's critique, which is the task of this section.

Nzegwu uses a fascinating historical study of Igbo women's right to work in Nigeria to present a nuanced and sophisticated critique of Nussbaum's implicit social analysis, as described in the previous section. Nzegwu writes in the article's introduction:

To some...[this discussion] would sound like nativism, a romantic re-creation of a pre-colonial reality that is of little relevance to Africa's postcolonial condition. But viewed critically, it is a *radical critique of foundational assumptions* about gender that underlie current development programs. (Nzegwu, 1995, p. 444, emphasis added)

She goes on to argue that this critique applies not only to the types of modernisation programmes associated with the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), but equally to 'the conceptual biases of the participatory-models of Non-Governmental Agencies (NGOs)' (Nzegwu, 1995, p. 445).

Nzegwu agrees that women should earn independent incomes—indeed, she notes that Ndiya (Ibibio) women had advocated this as early as 1946, in a critique of British policies (Nzegwu, 1995, p. 452). But she disputes the notion that illiteracy is a fundamental cause of women's inadequate incomes or unequal job-access. Nonetheless, it is true that illiterate women have difficulty finding employment or getting the resources necessary for independent income-generating activities. Why?

Have they internalised their culture's norms of inequality, and remain unequal because they are not educated enough to comprehend and challenge these norms? Nzegwu provides a detailed historical discussion of Igbo traditions to show that this is not the case. Nzegwu shows that women had strong political and economic roles in Igbo society, and that they valued this role and took action to ensure that their roles and position were not eroded. Their actions to maintain their role show that Igbo women had a strong cognitive ability to perceive inequality and a robust set of institutional mechanisms to maintain that valued equality. They also had a vigorous tradition of organised political protest aimed at

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maintaining gender equality. In her words, the 1929 Women's War (to protest British policies) showed

... their political acumen, foresight and vision, and revealed the existence of a powerful, highly efficient political structure with networks that transcended ethnic boundaries. The women displayed an incisive grasp of the colonial agenda, an ability to perform rapid and accurate analyses of the fluid, complex situation, and a remarkable capacity for formulating and deploying appropriate strategies (Nzegwu, 1995, p. 450).

Interestingly, Nzegwu also shows that it was *literate* privileged women from the emerging upper classes who showed a lack of political consciousness through an internalisation of Western patriarchal norms in the colonial period (Nzegwu, 1995, p. 450). She argues that this remains the case today. "At the upper-tier level, educated middle-class Igbo women find themselves shackled to a sexist system that leaves them politically disadvantaged to this day" (*ibid*, pp. 450–1). Hence,

When development planners assume that rural women must lack organizational skills, and conclude that they should devote their resources to funding 'awareness workshops,' they illicitly transpose the apathy of the middle-class women on to rural women who have in fact continued to be politically active; they illegitimately suppose that lack of literacy skills is equivalent to lack of organizational skills (Nzegwu, 1995, pp. 452–3).

Thus, Nzegwu sharply rejects the argument that literacy is an *intrinsic* value necessary for the flourishing of senses, imagination, thought, for demonstrating practical reason, for being able to recognise inequality, or for enhancing women's consciousness.

Do illiterate women fail to attain jobs because they lack the skills and productivity needed to compete effectively or to undertake income-generating activities as equals? Nzegwu notes that increased literacy does not translate into increased productivity in agriculture, so that we cannot attribute poorer income-generating ability to lower skills or lower productivity on the part of the illiterate (Nzegwu, 1995, p. 453). Further, she convincingly argues that in terms of a wide variety of jobs and income-generating activities—the bulk of the jobs and income-generating activities in this context—illiterate women in this society have the skills and capabilities necessary to work and earn an income.

Thus, we cannot attribute the unequal work status of poor, illiterate, Igbo women to their traditional norms, to cognitive impairment and political apathy created by a lack of education, or to reduced levels of skills and productivity due to illiteracy. Nor can we presume that literacy and education will result in increased rather than decreased feminist consciousness and activism, since literate upper class women show far fewer signs of such cognitive recognition and consciousness than the illiterate poor women.

However, there is little doubt that in the data on Nigeria we see that empirically, economic inequality is linked to illiteracy. Why? Nzegwu argues that employers, government institutions and aid programs, including 'participatory' non-governmental organisation (NGO) efforts, have institutionalised literacy as a filter for access to a variety of social and economic entitlements, including employment. This is because of their *adherence to the conceptual frame in which the causal links between literacy, work skills, and cognitive capacity are presumed* (Nzegwu, 1995, p. 453). By assuming that those without literacy are not yet equipped for or capable of undertaking income-generating work at a level equal to those with literacy, they institutionalise literacy as a criterion for attaining equal access to jobs or resources. Not surprisingly, our data then show that the unlettered are disproportionately unemployed, underpaid and stuck at the bottom of the job structure.

Why do we still focus on making the illiterate literate as a precondition for equal access to jobs, instead of seeing literacy requirements as a mode of justifying the unequal labour market, which rewards some groups at the expense of others? Nzegwu's analysis suggests that when we use cognitive frameworks that uncritically privilege literacy, we naturalise the higher value (and concomitant material and political privileges) accorded to the literate, and legitimise the very power structure we are trying to undo. Thus, she shows that in a context where literacy acts as a job-filter to legitimise upper-class dominance in the labour market, 'participatory-NGO' efforts end up maintaining and promoting, rather than undoing, this structural barrier. These approaches simply assume a causal relationship between illiteracy and gender-inequality, as Nussbaum's social analysis above did, and in the process slip in an *ethnocentric normative assessment* of the capabilities of the illiterate. The ethnocentric framework they use not only institutionalises the inequality, it justifies it through the ethnocentric and classist presumptions about non-Western illiterate women, presumptions that are in-built into our social analysis ('explanation') of why they fare poorly. It also has the effect of *reducing* these women's sense of self-worth, as the illiterate, internalising the dominant frame that gives more value to the literate, begin to see themselves as less capable, and feel less able to protest these approaches as a result of such internalisation.

It is as *structural critique* of the role of power in shaping the cognitive frameworks used to analyse the world in current approaches to development, including liberal-participatory frameworks such as Nussbaum's, then, that Nzegwu writes (1995, p. 453):

Observing the politics and ideological power of literacy, Pattanayak (1991 [p. 105]) notes that when literacy is construed as the basis of modernization: "illiteracy is grouped with poverty, malnutrition, lack of education, and health care, while literacy is often equated with growth of productivity, child care, and the advance of civilization." Such a classification, Pattanayak suggests, 'naturalizes' literacy as the panacea for successful development. . .

Nzegwu foregrounds the question of how structural power legitimates itself. She does this by providing an historical analysis of the emergence and consolidation of social institutions that are assumed, in the social analysis deployed by Nussbaum as discussed in the previous section, to be neutral and essentially transparent. While the above analysis focused on the literacy-employment link, we can similarly use a framework that historicises the institutions of political organisation as a way to explore their power dynamics, and ask what implicit model of politics and political activism informs Nussbaum's argument that literacy is central for political activism. Is literacy essential for 'comprehending' issues—something Nzegwu shows us is not true—or for 'getting heard?' If it is really about getting heard, then we need a serious social analysis about *why* other voices are not heard—and whether simply becoming literate will be enough. Learning to read and write in a local language may not make one better able to reach the English-language e-mail world of global NGOs and transnational organisations.

Our examination of Nzegwu's alternate social analysis of literacy not only provides us with a different way of thinking about the politics of literacy. It lets us see that *each particular application* of the universal approach requires—usually assumes—a social analysis. And, for each instance of application that makes a claim about what is necessary for promoting universal flourishing, we can ask—indeed, *need to ask* if we come from a critical perspective committed to ending oppression—whether ideological claims that uphold power are embedded in the analysis being used, and whether alternate social analyses may lead us to different conclusions.

5. Nussbaum's misreading of structural critique

Nzegwu's critique of both the intrinsic and instrumental value of literacy appears in a volume co-edited and introduced by Nussbaum. Nussbaum has described the inclusion of non-Western scholars in the books that develop her project as part of a concerted effort to avoid ethnocentrism, which she acknowledges as a danger to universalist thinking. This section examines Nussbaum's response to Nzegwu in her editor's introduction to the volume in which Nzegwu's piece appeared. My purpose is not just to show that Nussbaum did not grasp Nzegwu's critique, but to examine the *nature* of Nussbaum's misreading.

As demonstrated in the previous section, Nzegwu argues that, historically, literacy in Nigeria has been a means to institutionalise the prestige of the upper, educated classes. In this context, literacy projects cannot simply be treated as an uncomplicated means of empowerment, since they serve to legitimate the structures of power that are responsible for poor women's current state of inequality. Nussbaum not only fails to register this argument, but writes that 'Because it is not her theme, Nzegwu does not place emphasis on the obstacles to women's full equality that surely exist in the Nigerian context' (Nussbaum, 1995A, pp. 12–13). That is, Nussbaum ignores Nzegwu's extended discussion of the historical institutionalisation of literacy *as an obstacle to women's equality*. Nussbaum then proceeds (1995A, pp. 12–13) to rectify the presumed omission by providing statistical data on inequality in employment and literacy in Nigeria. She implies a causal link between illiteracy and unemployment, apparently failing to register that it is precisely the nature and status of this causal link that Nzegwu has disputed.

How is Nussbaum able to ignore Nzegwu's theme—the institutional role of literacy as an obstacle to equality—and instead write that obstacles to equality are not her theme? The powerful framing that produces this misreading is that of 'modernity' versus 'tradition'. Nussbaum chooses to introduce Nzegwu's article as 'a vigorous defense of one traditional conception of women's role'. She says (Nussbaum, 1995A, p. 13): 'we end with a non-Western female voice that speaks with pride of its own traditions, viewing these as valuable resources in the critical social thought and action of women the world over.' (Similarly, in Nussbaum, 1998, p. 790, she writes that she learned about the importance of personal ties among women in the context of sub-Saharan Africa from Nzegwu's article.)

What is wrong with this framing? It is certainly true that Nzegwu writes positively about 'tradition' when she tells us about the organisational and cognitive capacities of specific Nigerian women. Writing about the 1929 Igbo Women's War (to protest British policies), she writes:

...their political acumen, foresight and vision, and revealed the existence of a powerful, highly efficient political structure with networks that transcended ethnic boundaries. The women displayed an incisive grasp of the colonial agenda, an ability to perform rapid and accurate analyses of the fluid, complex situation, and a remarkable capacity for formulating and deploying appropriate strategies (Nzegwu, 1995, p. 450).

But if we look carefully, we see that here, and elsewhere, Nzegwu emphasises the flexibility and adaptability of these (illiterate) women *in the face of a changing world* that threatens their social position, *not* their repetition or reenactment of 'tradition'. As the previous section showed, Nzegwu was acutely aware of the danger that her discussion '*would sound like nativism, a romantic re-creation of a pre-colonial reality*', (emphasis added) insisting that '*viewed critically, it is a radical critique of foundational assumptions about gender that underlie current development programs*' (Nzegwu, 1995, p. 444, emphasis added). That is, the radical critique depends precisely on *not* consigning these capacities and actions to 'tradition', as Nussbaum (1995A, pp. 12–13) does:

The volume ends with a vigorous defense of one traditional conception of women's role. . . It is appropriate that we should end on this note, for we would not wish to be read as saying that all good ideas about women's equality come from the Western Enlightenment. The cultures of the Enlightenment have frequently been unjustly contemptuous of the traditions of the people they have colonised, and obtuse about discovering that those traditions are [sic]. Nzewgwu is surely right that the Victorian wife (or even the contemporary American professional woman) might profit from acquaintance with the remarkable tradition of 'sitting on a man'. She might also study with profit its associated patterns of women's group affiliation and self-definition, strikingly at variance with Western customs in which women's social identity derives primarily from that of a male head of household. These recognitions are in no way incompatible with the sort of universalism we wish to defend, as we have emphasised throughout. We want to take good ideas where we find them, and then think about how they might be implemented in a variety of concrete contexts. Having been, on the whole, highly critical of traditions, both non-Western and Western, we end with a non-Western female voice that speaks with pride of its own traditions, viewing these as valuable resources in critical social thought and action of women the world over.

Once the modern/traditional binary is set as the *interpretive* frame, it overrides Nzewgwu's argument *despite* her request at the start of her article that we *not* read her as a romantic nativist. Every affirmation by Nzewgwu of something done by non-Westernised Nigerian women is simply read as a proud affirmation of tradition, and therefore as something that, in a generous spirit, women everywhere might draw inspiration from. But while one can value it (that is, say nice things about the 'tradition'), once consigned to the category of 'tradition' as it is used here, it can no longer be read as *social analysis*. It is not surprising that, given this framing, Nussbaum also fails to take on board Nzewgwu's commentary on the 'apathy' of the literate 'middle-class women' who often run NGOs, or 'the conceptual biases of the participatory-models of Non-Governmental Agencies (NGOs)' (Nzewgwu, 1995, p. 445). Instead, Nzewgwu's rich historical discussion of the structural and causal mechanisms that produce inequality for illiterate women is registered by Nussbaum via dismay about neglect of women's managerial knowledge.

The issue here is not whether one is 'for' or 'against' tradition. Rather, the question is about the *analytical status* of the concept of tradition in Nussbaum's framework. Once a nuanced historical analysis of social institutions has been collapsed into a defense of colourful 'tradition', the issues raised in Nzewgwu's discussion can only resurface as discrete and isolable skills, rituals and practices that we might want to draw on or recover in a generous multicultural spirit. When 'tradition' means anything *more* serious or integrated than this, in Nussbaum's thought, it registers as obstinate nativism or thinly-disguised apologetics for women's oppression. Thus, Nussbaum (2000A, pp. 294–6, 2003B) assigns all criticisms of her approach to literacy to the categories of nativism, relativism, apologia for women's oppression, an instance of argument from economic necessity and/or internalised oppression and false consciousness or 'poor implementation'. There is simply no *category* among these within which Nzewgwu's social critique could fit.¹

The next section of this paper concludes by showing that the absence of a category where Nzewgwu's critique could fit and the reading of Nzewgwu as a defender of her tradition are part of the underlying ethnocentric modernist framework that Nussbaum has used in developing her universal approach.

¹ The absence of such a category is not accidental. Quillen (2001A, p. 89) argues that the social analysis provided by Nussbaum is not 'adequate to the task...of analyzing the relationships among different mechanisms and sources of oppression.' As Quillen notes in the subsequent exchange on this article between her and Nussbaum (Nussbaum, 2001; Quillen, 2001B), Nussbaum fails to engage with the issue of structural power in her response to Quillen.

6. Modernist developmentalism and the limits of universalist ethics

Although Sen's critique of Nussbaum's adaptation of his approach differs from mine, he says, arguing against 'the fixing of a cemented list of capabilities', that:

I am a great believer in theory, . . . But pure theory cannot 'freeze' a list of capabilities for all societies . . . That would be not only a denial of the reach of democracy, but also a misunderstanding of what pure theory can do, completely divorced from the particular social reality that any particular society faces (Sen, 2004, p. 78).

We can read this as two related questions: what is entailed in the construction of a list 'for all societies', and what is assumed in the move between a universal list and a 'particular social reality'?

So far, I have developed my discussion around the second question. I have shown that the move from a universal list to a 'particular social reality' requires social analysis. The social analysis Nzegwu uses, and that I used to raise questions about political voice toward the end of Section 4, comes from the framework used by a large body of scholarship that raises the question of *structural power and its relation to cognitive frameworks used to understand and organise the world*. This is the question raised by Marx, by critics of developmentalism, and by postcolonial scholars.¹ What sets the terms of participation in the raced and gendered logics of contemporary capitalist markets? What authorises power and respect and legitimates, or renders invalid and delegitimates, alternate perspectives on our social order and competing modes of entering the social world? These questions can only be taken up in a social analysis that examines ethnocentrism not as an *attitude*, but as an *ideology*. Only when approached in this way—that is, as a cognitive framework that emerges out of a power dynamic—can we see how ethnocentric ideology legitimates and naturalises power, reproducing unequal relations while rendering them invisible.

What our discussion shows is that at the center of Nussbaum's and Nzegwu's competing positions on literacy are *divergent social analyses* of the causes and sources of women's inequality. Nussbaum's efforts to address the problem of ethnocentrism by carving out universalist ethics at an 'abstract' or general level thus prove inadequate, since the 'locus' of ethnocentrism *shifts* to the *social analysis* used to 'apply' the universal framework to various concrete social realities. In short Nussbaum has not *addressed* ethnocentrism, but instead has pushed it into the social analysis used to apply the framework to diverse settings. Since any effort to apply the universal approach to a concrete social reality entails social analysis, our discussion of literacy raises a *general* point or potential problem with Nussbaum's framework.

But this social analysis is not just deployed at the moment of deciphering why specific capabilities are not attained in a given society—the point of application discussed so far. It also underlies the prior choice of measures used to assess whether people have attained an adequate level of functioning in a particular capability. This may be less problematic for

¹ It is this element of Marx's work, especially his discussion of the role of exploitation in organising economic opportunities and rewards within the structure of capitalist societies, and his concomitant critique of liberalism and of liberal democratic states as incapable of actually enabling universal flourishing—what Spivak (1997) calls the premise of 'justice-under-capitalism'—that is lost in Nussbaum's invocation of Marx, as noted above (note 3 on page 3 of this article). Though Nussbaum argues that her Aristotelian conception of human nature has links to the Marxist conception of human subjectivity as arising out of social interaction, she mainly foregrounds the Marxist concept of 'false consciousness'—usually as applied to the consciousness of 'others'. But the Marxist concepts of ideology and hegemony *as applied to the liberal imagination of justice under the institutional operation of contemporary capitalist society* as developed in the works of Marxist scholars following the Gramscian tradition (whose concept of hegemony is the source of postcolonial scholarship on orientalism following Edward Said, and is central to the Subaltern Studies school), is absent from her analysis.

some kinds of capabilities and functionings, primarily those that pertain to the body, such as health and nutrition.¹ But assessment is quite difficult for functionings that are properties of people's social and mental lives, their psychic states or the qualities of their inter-subjective relationships. We have already examined the difficulty of assuming that literacy is linked to, and is thus a proxy measure for, more fundamental capacities or qualities of psychic or social life. Similar points can be made about the continued use of labour force participation rates as a convenient measure of women's control over material environments despite the obvious Marxist objections to using wage labour as a measure of emancipation (Charusheela, 2003).

Thus, even though it presents itself as two separate stages—one stage of measuring to discern if key capabilities have been met, and another of applying social analysis to decipher the causes for failures to attain key capabilities—social analysis is already implicit in the measurement stage. We cannot assess different societies in terms of 'senses, imagination, and thought' without a social analysis that grounds the appropriate traces or measures of those things. And if we believe that the cross-cultural comparisons based on the measures we choose are meaningful, we must believe we are using a social analysis that has universal application.

The social analysis implicit in both the measurement and application stages of Nussbaum's framework is *modernist*. As used here, modernism (or modernity) is first of all a social vision that includes a liberal-democratic nation-state, an industrial capitalist economy, and a series of other specific institutions of public life and 'civil society', requiring a particular mode of interaction between individuals, individual and state, and individual and society.² This conception is generally offered as a normative ideal.

Built into this vision are assumptions about the appropriate institutional unit for cultural or social organisation—the nation-state—and the appropriate institutional modes by which participation and voice should be expressed (constitutions and parliaments, legal forms and court structures, private and public spheres, political parties and civic organisations, rallies and petitions and writs, contract forms and state adjudication of them). Also built into this is an underlying set of assumptions about human nature that masquerades as universal—cognition expressed in particular ways, decisions made in specific ways, reason and voice deployed *in ways appropriate to these institutions*.

By deploying this vision of state policy as a universal normative ideal, Nussbaum has converted the ideal vision of what the state and civil society *should* be into a *social ontology*. That is, she assumes that *existing institutions* can usefully be understood *by reference* to the modern ideal—as fully modern, incompletely modern, or not modern at all (i.e., 'traditional').³ With this framing, people's problems with modern institutions are always

¹ This is the case when what we seek to promote—adequate nutrition, longevity—is *directly* captured by our measures of nutrition and life expectancy. Once *meanings* of the body and bodily practices enter the picture, it complicates matters, as shown by the debates about clitoridectomy within feminist scholarship. This does not imply that one *cannot* take an ethical position on the practice and thus turns relativist, as Nussbaum's interpretation of these debates seems to assume. Rather, it shows that one cannot take a *simple* ethical position but must instead work to navigate competing types of power structures and carve out a different space for feminist political positioning (just as after reading Nzegwu one does not take a position 'for' or 'against' literacy, but instead takes a more *complex* position on the issue).

² See Charusheela and Zein-Elabdin (2003) and Zein-Elabdin and Charusheela (2004) for a fuller discussion of modernism in economics.

³ The question is not whether modernity is a worthy ideal, but whether that ideal captures enough about actual institutions to help us understand them. Any number of ideals or utopian social visions are possible, such as ideals of altruistically benevolent patriarchs who act as bearers of good or responsible masculine authority, or primitive communist ideals of solidaristic rural communities. But it does not follow that a given vision—benevolent patriarchal, romantic rural *or* modernist—is a useful analytical tool for the analysis of the world we inhabit.

understood in terms of lack of access to, or participation in, those institutions, not as fundamental, in-built properties of real-life institutional structures. It thus becomes impossible to conceive that institutions that present themselves as modern might *generate* structural inequality.

Modernist ideologues assume, axiomatically, that women's problems lie elsewhere—in the sphere of family, or in a non-modern 'traditional' culture, or in something *else* that generates lack of participation in and exclusion from these institutions, never in the actual politics of institutionalisation itself. The hallmark of a modernist approach is its use of a traditional/modern split to organise *analysis* of social institutions. We have seen Nussbaum deploy this framework in her analysis of capabilities, and in her reading of Nzegwu. In her view women fail to flourish because of their lack of access to, or inadequate participation in, modernist institutions. These institutions are understood via the categories of liberal political philosophy, which results in conflating the normative just-so stories about the origins of liberal polities with the actual histories of liberal institutions.¹

The same framework filters responses to criticism. Nussbaum interprets critique of her perspective in terms of 'tradition', whether she understands it as benign multiculturalism (Nzegwu) or malign nativism (cultural relativists and apologists for patriarchy). The category of 'tradition' seals off institutional history and ideological politics: traditions may be respected or reviled since they call forth a *moral* or *ethical* positioning from the modernist, but they are not objects whose history, institutionalisation and operation in a contemporary world calls for *social analysis*. Similarly, identities (the counterpart category for 'tradition') can be valued, rejected or otherwise *assessed*. But, despite the Aristotelian framing, there is scant attention to the sexed, gendered, raced and classed social histories, to the discursive framings and struggles over meaning by which nation-states have been constituted and national and ethnic identities consolidated. Thus, while Nussbaum defends her universalism from charges that she sees as coming from the argument from culture, the value of diversity and paternalism (Nussbaum, 2000A, pp. 41–59), she has no category for critiques of universalism coming from a perspective on structural power that she even recognises, let alone responds to.

The only other category for critique that Nussbaum (2003A, pp. 294–6, 2003B) allows, is 'poor implementation'. Using this perspective, the focus becomes one of fixing the problems of application, rather than exploring the power dynamics embedded in real-life institutions that may be responsible for the 'implementation' problems. Here, political liberalism acts as a counterpart to the neoliberal 'good governance' discourse. While their policy agendas differ, the response to failures turns out to be similar when it comes to the specific institutions—free markets in one case, state and 'civil society' in the other—that are at the centre of their respective modernist imaginations.²

¹ Drawing out the implications of this assumption, Feldman and Gellert (2006) argue that Nussbaum's universalism fails to pay attention to 'state forms and practices, as well as unequal power relations...' (p. 423). They pay particular attention to the ways in which socio-historical analyses and categories can help avoid the ways that Nussbaum's project '...generalizes across nations in ways that fail to recognize important differences between them, and inadequately appreciates the historically produced relations among them' and note that '[t]his elision of the structural relations of global inequality leads her focus on inequality among individuals as the basis for her list' (p. 432).

² Byres (1997) makes a similar point about the limits of current writing about economic policy in debates about planning and liberalisation in India, and calls for a Gramscian approach to the state as a more appropriate mode of comprehending both the flaws of planning and the problems of the new economic policies post-1991 in India.

We can now see more fully the reasons for the failure of the process of the cross-cultural conversation that Nussbaum set up as a guard against the ethnocentric tendencies of modernism. As Babbitt (2005, p. 2, emphasis added) writes:

We cannot even hear certain stories *unless we first recognize what those stories might explain*, which might be the failure of freedom and democracy in the hemisphere

Such stories, she says, 'are not as epistemically significant as the questions that determine their meaningfulness in a specific context.' She goes on to note (p. 12, emphases added):

For instance, Martha Nussbaum, a philosopher of development, proposes that we can acquire an idea of the essential properties of humanness by collecting stories from appropriately diverse sources (Nussbaum and Glover, 72–73) . . . This proposal is naive. Collecting stories does not provide moral understanding and I suggest that it does not provide understanding at all in controversial cases, at least not in the first instance. Whether stories provide understanding depends upon the importance given to them as stories *about some question or other*. Unless we first examine critically generalizations about human flourishing, for instance, *some accounts can never be recognized as relevant* to understanding human well being.

In these terms, Nussbaum reads Nzegwu as answering the question of what is useful in Nigerian tradition, not as responding to the question of the causes for women's inequality, which sets the parameters for the entire exchange. More generally, linking our discussion of modernist social analysis with Babbitt's critique of the way stories are read for moral meanings (Babbitt, 2005, pp. 12–13), Nussbaum's effort to find commonalities across cultures is flawed because she 'listens' with the ear of the modern political liberal looking for commonalities, that is, *agreement*. All stories that indicate dissent are then 'heard' and 'explained' via the categories allowed for critique in her framework. She thus does not hear dissenting stories as anything other than affirmation of tradition (or alternately, as paternalism, nativism, cultural relativism, apologetics for oppression, false consciousness, the argument from economic necessity and implementation), and so fails to register criticisms of the historical role of power in, and hence the problems with, the institutions on which she rests her hopes for emancipation.

Modernist *ideology* becomes invisible to someone using a modernist *analytical framework*, as it shapes not only their own approach, but also how they understand and interpret others. Nzegwu shows how a modernist ideology that posits poor women as ontologically lacking enables oppression and blocks their access to important functionings. The inability of Nussbaum's framework to accommodate this kind of institutional reality is mirrored by Nussbaum's inability to register Nzegwu's critique. This inability is, as postcolonial feminist critics of ethnocentric modernism have noted, related to structural privilege. The ethnocentrism that attributes poverty to a lack of education rests on an unexamined counterpart assumption that the privileges enjoyed by educated people are appropriate and merited.¹ Thus, the normalisation of privilege within modernist ideology has a dual action—it both creates inequality and makes mechanisms that institutionalise inequality invisible to us.

¹ As feminists, we need to consider our positionality within structures of oppression as we develop our social analyses. It is easy for us, as educated women, to privilege our own skills and modes of engaging in the world, and to assume that our relative flourishing is *appropriately* due to our education, rather than imagining that an underlying system of privilege has produced not only our relative flourishing, but *also* the difference of those who fail to flourish and the set of values that privilege our attainments and modes of engaging with the world.

Modernist ideology either reduces structural critique to a technocratic–managerial problem of application, or misreads it as defence of tradition or particularism. I hope it is now clear that a critique of modernist universalism is not tantamount to relativism or to atavistic, uncritical celebration of the local and the traditional. This simplistic binary of critique is itself a product of modernism (see Charusheela, 2001, 2004), and acts to guard modernist approaches from critical self-revaluation, leaving us unable to attain in practice the hoped-for open-ended critical revision that liberalism promises in theory.

Thus, at each step of Nussbaum’s development of the capabilities approach—in ‘listening’ to diverse stories for commonalities and deciding which capabilities to highlight, coming up with appropriate measures for them, and deciphering what the source of the problems are and how to address them—assumptions about social life and social analysis are already embedded. The question becomes—what social analysis should we use? My discussion above suggests that we need a theory that can help us *guard against the difficulty of embedded modernist assumptions, given that such assumptions can simultaneously authorise power and render it invisible*. Poststructuralist feminist and postcolonialist perspectives offer such a framework. They begin by seeing society as shaped by power, and argue that given the *historical* legacies of the structures of patriarchal power, class, race, orientalism and ethnocentrism, we should not be surprised to find that these systems have ramified into our cognitive frameworks.

We have come back full circle to the postcolonial critique of modernist universals that we began this paper with. Nussbaum’s rejection of such postcolonial critique and argument for universalism rested on a two-fold move: (i) suggesting that postcolonial critique necessarily leads to a corrosive ethical relativism, and (ii) arguing that her reconstituted universalism escaped the problems of ethnocentric modernism that beset previous forms of universalism. I have shown that Nussbaum’s approach is no more automatically safe from ethnocentric universalism, or automatically capable of addressing the hold of structural power on our discourses and social analyses, than previous renditions of modernist political liberalism.

Indeed, as argued in Charusheela (2004), postcolonial thought explicitly seeks to explore the limits of not only modernism but also of relativism and nativism, in carving out its perspective on social power in its ontology and ethics. Because of its refusal to regard questions of social analysis as settled, and because of its refusal to regard the idealised modernist institutions of political liberalism as beyond the purview of structural critique, postcolonial critiques, far from being relativist, reflect a deeper commitment to liberatory practice than developmentalist modernism.¹

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¹ For an anti-relativist poststructuralist approach to literacy that *both* valorises it *and* works to ensure that literary projects do not devolve into a universalist project of epistemic control—and manages to do this *because* it begins with the presumption of subaltern difference—see Spivak (2001, 2003).

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