

Social Capital and Democracy

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Social capital is in danger of going the way of political culture—a potentially powerful concept that is given many different meanings by many different people for many different purposes. This article starts by picking out three different aspects or dimensions of the concept—norms (especially trust), networks, and consequences. It then considers three models of social capital and the forms of trust and democracy associated with them. Finally it discusses the role of voluntary associations as a foundation for social capital, arguing that their importance may be overstated in the classical Tocquevillean model of the 19th century, and that, in any case, modern democracy may be increasingly based on different forms of trust and association.

Those, who liked one another so well as to joyn into Society, cannot but be supposed to have some Acquaintance and Friendship together, and some Trust one in another. (John Locke, *Second Treatise on Government*)

THE NATURE AND ORIGINS OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

Social capital may be understood and defined in terms of (a) norms and values, (b) networks, or (c) consequences—voluntarily produced collective facilities and resources. These three elements are no doubt closely related in the real world, but to run them together or to include two or three in the same definition creates conceptual confusion, makes unwarranted assumptions, and is likely to muddle empirical questions. Therefore, the first section of this article considers the three aspects of social capital and their possible relationships. The second and third sections raise empirical questions arising out of the theoretical implications of the first part.

NORMS AND VALUES

According to this approach, social capital is a subjective phenomenon composed of a range of values and attitudes of citizens that influence or determine how they relate to each other. Particularly important are attitudes and values

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relating to trust and reciprocity because these are crucial for social and political stability and cooperation. Treated in this way, social capital focuses on those cultural values and attitudes that predispose citizens to cooperate, trust, understand, and empathize with each other—to treat each other as fellow citizens, rather than as strangers, competitors, or potential enemies. Therefore, social capital is important because it constitutes a force that helps to bind society together by transforming individuals from self-seeking and egocentric calculators, with little social conscience or sense of mutual obligation, into members of a community with shared interests, shared assumptions about social relations, and a sense of the common good. Trust and reciprocity are crucial aspects of social capital. As Simmel (1950, p. 326) wrote, trust is “one of the most important synthetic forces within society.”

Reciprocity does not entail tit-for-tat calculations in which participants can be sure that a good turn will be repaid quickly and automatically. Generalized reciprocity is based on the assumption that good turns will be repaid at some unspecified time in the future, perhaps even by an unknown stranger (Sahlins, 1972). This means that generalized reciprocity involves uncertainty, risk, or vulnerability—it is based on trust in others (Kollock, 1994, p. 319; Luhmann, 1988; Misztal, 1996, p. 18). Or, to put it the other way round, ordinary daily life involves so many small risks that it is impossible to manage without some trust in fellow citizens.

Social capital is, therefore, responsible for converting the Hobbesian state of nature in which life is nasty, brutish, and short, to something less dangerous and more pleasant. It forms the foundations of a cooperative and stable social and political order that encourages voluntary collective behavior, and it generates the goodwill and understanding that enables citizens to resolve their conflicts peacefully.

In many ways, social capital is the modern social science analogue of fraternity, which has tended to drop out of political discussion in the 20th century. Indeed, in the 1970s and 1980s some political circles assumed that only liberty mattered for democracy, and even then a narrow economic definition of liberty—the liberty of the market place. In the 1990s it is increasingly realized that democracy is much more than liberty and requires a range of values, attitudes, and assumptions of the kind that comprise social capital. Apart from anything else, the economic transactions of the market are built on an element of trust (Arrow, 1972, p. 357; Coleman, 1988; Fukuyama, 1995), because trust helps to turn rational fools into effective cooperators. More generally, fraternity (or social capital) turns a self-defeating concern with individual liberty into a sustainable concern for collective liberty and social justice. The recent debates between libertarians and communitarians about civil society, citizenship, and political trust are also about the importance of what can be labelled social capital or fraternity (see, e.g., Bianco, 1994; Burt, 1993, 1995; Cohen & Rogers 1992; Coleman, 1990, p. 306; Duncan, 1995; Etzioni, 1993; Inglehart, 1988, 1990; Mulhall & Swift, 1992; Shils, 1991).

NETWORKS

Some writers focus on social networks of individuals, groups, and organizations as the crucial component of social capital because an ability to mobilize a wide range of personal social contacts is crucial to the effective functioning of social and political life (see, e.g., Kolankiewicz, 1994, pp. 149-151). Although social networks and social trust are obviously very closely related, there are two reasons why they should be kept separate conceptually. Whereas the norms and values are subjective and intangible, social networks and organizations are objective and observable. Second, if we are to understand the nature and origins of social capital, it is important to keep the norms and networks approaches theoretically distinct. Simply stated, do social networks generate the level of trust necessary for civilized social and political life, or is it, on the contrary, the existence of widespread trust that makes the development of social networks possible in the first place? According to Tocqueville (1968) and Mill (1910), networks of voluntary activity create trust and cooperation. Mill (1910, p. 164) regarded voluntary associations as a means of "mental education," and Tocqueville believed them to be "the great free school" of American democracy. According to Pateman (1970, p. 105), "we learn to participate by participating," and according to Ostrom (1990, p. 206), "Networks of civic engagement foster robust norms of reciprocity." Putnam (1995, p. 666) writes that "people who join are people who trust . . . the causation flows mainly from joining to trusting."

At the same time, it is difficult to see how social networks can be created unless there is trust to start with. Perhaps the social sciences can never completely unravel such chicken-and-egg problems, but it does not help the attempt to confuse possible causes and possible effects in the same definition.

THE OUTPUTS OF SOCIAL CAPITAL— FACILITIES, SERVICES, AND GOODS

"Social capital," wrote Coleman (1988, p. 98), "is defined by its function. . . . Like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible." Putnam (1993, p. 167) also partly defines social capital in terms of its ability to "improve the efficiency of society by facilitating co-ordinated actions." Sometimes these products are physical, or literally concrete—a village hall produced by voluntary action—but they may also be the continuing supply of fish from a lake or grass from a village common (Ostrom, 1990), or a crop harvested, or the capital accumulated by members of a rotating credit association (Ardenner, 1964; Geertz, 1962). In modern society, examples include baby-sitting circles, community watch schemes, car pools, street parties, and charitable goods and services.

It is open to question whether any social phenomenon can be defined in terms of its function or product, because the same phenomenon may have different functions and products, and different phenomenon may share the same ones. To

include products or functions in a definition is also to confuse matters of definition with matters of empirical investigation. Social capital may indeed generate valuable goods and services, a possibility that makes the concept especially interesting, but we should not assume that it does, and we should not include such goods and benefits as part of the definition. Rather we should ask the empirical question, does social capital help generate collective goods and services, and if so, under what conditions?

MODELS OF DEMOCRACY AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

COMMUNAL SOCIETY, MECHANICAL SOLIDARITY, "THICK" TRUST, AND PRIMARY DEMOCRACY

In small face-to-face communities, "thick" trust (Williams, 1988, p. 8) is the essential ingredient of mechanical solidarity or *gemeinschaft*, which is generated by intensive, daily contact between people, often of the same tribe, class, or ethnic background. Communities of this kind are generally socially homogeneous, isolated, and exclusive, and able to exercise the strict social sanctions necessary to reinforce thick trust (Coleman 1988, pp. 105-108). The classic examples are tribal societies, but there are some Western analogues in the form of small, homogeneous, and isolated communities sometimes found in rural peripheries or remote islands.

The West may also have pockets of thick trust formed in total institutions such as small sects, churches, ghettos, and minority communities. Such closed communities are likely to produce thick trust within them, but distrust of the wider society. To a more limited extent, thick trust may also be generated by the relatively intensive interactions of such groups as consciousness-raising groups, self-help groups, and mutual support groups (e.g., single parents, battered wives, the handicapped). Last, voluntary communities of the alternative kind, and some aspects of the new social movements and their communities, may also generate a weak form of thick trust.

The thick trust of primary relations is likely to be associated with simple forms of primary democracy involving direct political participation. In the modern world, this is restricted to a few exceptional cases: New England towns and their meetings; small, alternative communities; isolated and homogeneous communities; and some special organizations. Primary democracy cannot operate at the national political level of modern states.

VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATIONS, ORGANIC SOLIDARITY, AND "THIN" TRUST: THE TOCQUEVILLEAN MODEL OF CIVIC VIRTUE

Modern society is based on the "thin" trust, which tends to be associated with the organic solidarity or *gesellschaft* of looser, more amorphous, secondary relations. Particularly important are the overlapping and interlocking networks

of voluntary associations—as so many writers claim, from Tocqueville, Mill, Durkheim, Toennies, Simmel, and Weber, to the recent social capital literature. Thin trust is the product of weak ties, which, according to Granovetter's celebrated article (1973), constitute a powerful and enduring basis for social integration in modern, large-scale society (see also Evans & Boyte, 1992).

In the Tocquevillean (Tocqueville, 1968, pp. 355-359) model, face-to-face interaction in formally organized voluntary organizations is essential for generating democratic norms among citizens. They teach citizens the civic virtues of trust, moderation, compromise, reciprocity, and the skills of democratic discussion and organization. These are what might be labelled internal effects, but there are also external effects. Externally, multiple and overlapping groups create cross-cutting ties that bind society together by its own internal divisions and produce pluralist competition between different interests. Foley and Edwards (1996) refer to internal effects as Civil Society I and to external effects as Civil Society II.

Are voluntary organizations really so important for social capital? The reason for the question is simple: Participation in school, family, work, and community are likely to have far stronger internal effects. In the first place they usually take up far more time than voluntary organizations and in the second, they generally involve much stronger emotional commitment. Quite large minorities of people in Western societies belong to no organizations at all, and only that small-stage army of largely middle- and upper-class joiners—E.E. Schattschneider's pluralist choir—devote a great deal of time to them.

It seems, on the face of it, implausible to ascribe a crucial role to voluntary organizations when they account for only a few hours a week of life, and even then for only a small minority of activists. As Levi (1996) argues, "trust is more likely to emerge in response to experiences and institutions outside the small associations than as a result of membership" (p. 48). It is not surprising, therefore, that Coleman (1988, pp. 109-116) stresses the importance of the family and school in the development of social capital, whereas Putnam (1995, p. 73) stresses the family as the most important form of social capital. The family may also be the most fundamental source of social capital. Putnam (1994, p. 667) also presents data showing that education is by far the strongest correlate of both trust and organizational membership (see also Uslaner, n.d., p. 30; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995, p. 514). According to Verba et al. (1995), "Workplaces provide the most opportunities for the practice of civic skills, churches the fewest" (p. 320). Is it possible that the voluntary sector is just one source of social capital, and perhaps not even a particularly important one compared with family, work, education, and neighborhood?

Even if we were to accept the Tocquevillean (1968) model of civic virtue, there are still problems. To place a high level of trust in ordinary people (horizontal trust) is one thing, to place the same level of trust in politicians (vertical trust), may be another. As Putnam (1994) puts it, "I might well trust my neighbors without trusting city hall, or vice versa" (p. 665). Similarly, I may trust some types of people, not others. Some organizations may promote

generalized trust between a variety of citizens, whereas others tend to divide their members from the rest of society. This underlines the need to distinguish norms from networks and ask the empirical question, what kinds of networks and associations bear on what sorts of trust?

A third problem with the Tocquevillean (1968) model is its assumption that social capital is a bottom-up phenomenon—that it is generated by grassroots participation. There is most probably a close association between membership of voluntary organizations, political attitudes, and political activity (van Deth, 1966, pp. 13-16; Verba & Nie, 1972, pp. 184-187), but they are also strongly affected by the structures and policies of governments—a top-down process (Levi, 1996, p. 50; Tarrow, 1996, pp. 394-395). “What role organized groups in civil society will play,” write Foley and Edwards (1996, p. 47), “depends crucially on the larger political setting.” For example, the move toward a market economy in the 1980s may have encouraged competition and helped to undermine the sense of trust and cooperation between citizens. An empirical task for social capital research is to explore the connections, if any, between government policies and structures, and social capital.

MODERN DEMOCRACY: IMAGINARY COMMUNITIES, ABSTRACT TRUST, EDUCATION, AND THE MEDIA

If we can distinguish usefully between the thick trust of a personal kind and the thin trust of a more impersonal kind, then perhaps we can go one step further and talk in terms of “imaginary,” “empathetic,” or “reflexive” communities that are built on abstract trust. According to Misztal (1996, p. 72), trust may range along a continuum or spectrum from personal to abstract. A more abstract form of trust is likely to be of growing importance in modern society. This is because its growing size, impersonal nature, complexity, fragmentation, and speed of change make it progressively difficult to depend on either personal or impersonal forms of trust. As Luhmann (1988) argues, the modern world is full of complexity, uncertainty, and risk; abstract trust makes this more manageable.

In modern society, the institutions of the mass media and education may be of particular and growing importance for the generation of abstract trust. Abstract trust is not built on the personal relations of primordial society, nor on secondary relations in formal organizations. In contemporary society, abstract trust may be generated by the all-important institutions of education and the media. Education provides us with a common knowledge of a set of dates, places, names, events, concepts, references, and quotations that help the social interaction of otherwise disparate individuals. Schools also set out to teach the art of cooperation by means of collective learning tasks, team games, school plays and bands, and joint activities of many kinds. They also develop an understanding of abstract ideas such as citizenship, trust, fairness, equality, universalism, the common good, and the golden rule. Although the increasing number who make it through higher education demonstrate high levels of trust

and organizational membership (Putnam, 1994), the concern is for the growing minority who do not get a good education at all.

The mass media may also be important for the generation of abstract trust, although there is, to be sure, strong disagreement about mass media effects (Greeley, 1997 [this issue]; Newton, 1996; Norris, 1996). Some emphasize the capacity of the electronic media to act as an integrating and homogenizing force that increases levels of political knowledge, competence, interest, sophistication, and activity—the cognitive mobilization school (see, e.g., Dalton, 1988, pp. 18-24; Inglehart, 1990, pp. 335-370; Sartori, 1989). Others emphasize the junk-food nature of the mass media that induces fear, isolation, political ignorance, low competence, and apathy—the “videomalaise” school of thought, on which Putnam (1994) draws when discussing the decline of social capital in the United States. This article can do no more than point out the potential importance of the media in relation to social capital, particularly their possible role in the generation of abstract trust.

There is some evidence for the existence of generalized and abstract trust in modern society. In their research on citizenship in Britain, Conover and Searing (1995, pp. 16, 18) write,

Today, blood and birth, like socialization and residence, are less important. . . . Culture is what counts . . . nearly two thirds said they regarded as “British” people from the Falklands and Gibraltar, people who were not born in Britain and perhaps not born of parents born in Britain, people who were definitely not socialized in Britain and, of course, were not residents of Britain either . . . national communities are imagined communities.

Similarly, the level of interpersonal trust among citizens in the member states of the European Union (EU) is increasing (Niedermayer, 1995, p. 237). Whether this spread of trust is due to individual processes such as education, travel, or media consumption, or whether it is due to the top-down process of being brought under the common governmental umbrella of the EU, is not clear, but the populations of the EU are showing a growing capacity to trust citizens of other countries, even though they may rarely meet them.

VOLUNTARY ORGANIZATIONS AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

Different types of voluntary activity may have very different implications for social capital. At one extreme there are highly formalized organizations, with written constitutions, elected and appointed officers, and expensive offices; at the other extreme there are loose and amorphous networks of individuals who come together casually and irregularly to play darts, discuss a novel, study religion, raise consciousness, organize a street party or a neighborhood watch scheme, run a baby-sitting circle or a car pool, organize a support group, or simply drink in a bar. Social science research tends to favor the formal organizations because they are easier to study, but they may also be less relevant to

social capital insofar as they tend to be more bureaucratic and formal and involve their members only rarely or marginally in their daily activities. They are also likely to be the vertical and hierarchical organizations of which Putnam (1993, p. 173) speaks. The socialization role of creating "habits of the heart" is now more likely to be played by horizontal associations, particularly those informal groups that involve fairly intense relations.

In recent decades there seems to have been a growth of large, professionally organized, business-like associations that tend to be remote from their members. The process was noticed in the United States as early as the 1970s (Gittell, 1980). There seem to be two major types. Citizens join the first simply for the benefits and services they provide in return for an annual membership fee. Good examples are the motoring associations whose size and wealth make powerful pressure groups, but that generate little interpersonal contact or grassroots engagement. Putnam (1995, p. 71) gives the American Association of Retired Persons as another example. The second type of checkbook membership involves not services but symbolic attachment—the people who join a political party, a social movement, a charity, or an arts club because they want to be allied with the cause. Some join such organizations to become involved in their activities, but others do so as a gesture.

In short, checkbook organizations may contribute to pluralist democracy (their external effects), but have little, if any, impact on social capital (internal effects). They tend to be the opposite of face-to-face, informal groups such as consciousness-raising groups or groups that meet once a month to discuss a book, which are more likely to have stronger internal than external effects.

There is also evidence that groups with a largely internal effect are growing in numbers and importance in modern society. According to Wuthnow (1994), there has been an expansion of such loose-knit, more-or-less organized, weak-obligation, support groups in America in recent times. Barton and Silverman (1994) focus on another example in their study of the growth of common-interest communities. The literature on the new social movements also characterizes them as "network of networks", which are more loose-knit, and less bureaucratic and hierarchical, than traditional parties and interest groups (Neidhardt, 1985; Neidhardt & Rucht, 1993; Tarrow, 1994, pp. 187-198). Danish research also suggests a growing number of user groups that are made up of decentralized and informal networks (Gundelach & Torpe, 1996).

Putnam (1995), quoting Wuthnow on "the weakest of obligations" feature of small support and caring groups, suggests that they "need to be accounted for in any serious reckoning of social connectedness," but continues, "they do not typically play the same role as traditional civic associations" (p. 72). Yet such small groups are an increasing feature of modern society, and *some* of them in *some circumstances* may well be more important than more formally organized voluntary associations in the formation of social capital. For some people, at some times, in some places, they are sporadic and have little internal influence on participants; for other people at other times, they may provide a relatively strong experience with strong internal effects.

For example, a Danish study by Gundelach and Torpe distinguishes between the "classical" formal organizations of the Tocqueville (1968) type and what they call network associations. The latter are looser, more informal, and more personal forms of association, which have a stronger impact on the attitudes and behavior of those who participate. The authors conclude that "we should study other mechanisms of creating democratic values than the voluntary associations and that we should develop new theories on democratic values which take the character of the present society into account" (Gundelach & Torpe, 1996, p. 31).

Another study of political participation in Britain is consistent with the Danish results. The authors (Parry, Moyser, & Day, 1992) distinguish between "formal groups such as trade unions and interest groups which give an impetus to action [by virtue of] the existence of institutionalized channels of communication," and "informal or *ad hoc* groups of neighbors concerned over a local development or parents worried at some proposed change in local schooling" (pp. 86-87). Their evidence shows that group resources, both formal and informal, are very important for political participation, and their data suggest that informal groups are at least as important as formal ones in generating satisfaction with political action (p. 281); in educating their members both cognitively and effectively (pp. 289-290); and in facilitating political action (p. 423, 427), particularly in local politics (p. 319). Perhaps their most interesting finding is that slightly more effort is involved in participation within informal groups (p. 275). At best this is only circumstantial evidence, but it does suggest that informal groups may be no less important than formal ones in the formation of social capital (see also Foley & Edwards, 1997 [this issue]).

CONCLUSIONS

Putnam (1993; see also Putnam, 1995, pp. 664-665) defines social capital as "features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions" (p. 167). This definition includes three conceptually different aspects of social capital—norms, networks, and consequences. The advantage of the definition is that it combines three aspects of social capital that make it an interesting and provocative concept. The disadvantage is that it runs different conceptual things together that should be separated, the better to study their empirical relationships. Are norms of trust generated by social networks and organizations? Do these, in their turn, improve the integration and efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions?

If we separate the three aspects of social capital, then a series of questions arise about its nature, causes, and consequences. Is there an empirical relationship between individual involvement in social networks and voluntary associations, on one hand, and relatively high levels of trust and reciprocity, on the other? What is the nature of the causal relationship, if any, between the two? Do voluntary organizations engender the civic virtues of trust and reciprocity, or are

those who join trusting in the first place? Are schools, families, workplaces, and neighborhoods more important than voluntary organizations for the generation of social capital?

If there is a relationship between joining and the subjective values that comprise social capital, then what sorts of networks, associations, and organizations are best at generating them? There may, indeed, be honor (and trust) among thieves, but as writers from Madison and Rousseau to Ostrom and Putnam have pointed out, there is also a dark side of social and political organization that produces conflict and division—the “mischief of faction.”

What sorts of organizations are best at generating what forms of social capital, and why? Are there organizations that tend to polarize and breed distrust of others, and bridging organizations that are better at creating the civic virtues? Are checkbook associations characterized by powerful external effects but weak internal ones? Do intensive but informal networks tend to have strong internal but weak external ones? And do the classical Tocquevillean associations—small enough to be personal but well organized enough to be politically effective—combine internal and external effects?

In short, to separate the three main dimensions or aspects of social capital is to raise a range of important questions about their relationships—in effect to ask about the nature, causes, and consequences of social capital. The answers to such questions may require us to adapt the classical Tocquevillean model to fit contemporary conditions.

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