Debate

Social Capital and Modernity

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Ben Fine elsewhere in this issue has offered an important and stinging critique of current approaches to social capital, building on much of his previous work on the subject. Though he does not explicitly call for the rejection of the term in this text,[1] his argument leaves the reader with the distinct impression that he does advocate an expulsion of 'social capital' from our vocabulary.

> Only if social capitalists explicitly confront both the rational choice origins in their understanding of the social and the economic in their understanding of capital will these conundrums be addressed. But little if nothing of social capital as it is today could possibly survive the exercises. (current p8)

This quotation points to the power of the concept of social capital and suggests the need to move beyond the concept itself to investigate the assumptions underlying its current usage: to move from an investigation of a concept to one of wider conceptions (Putnam 1981). Fine's criticisms are substantial and warrant studied attention, but should they lead to the conclusion that abandoning social capital is the best route? It is clearly important to address this critique, to consider what lessons the civil society debates might offer, and, finally, to reflect on possible responses.

Fine begins by noting how popular social capital has become, comparing it to perhaps the most overused and over-extended concept of our time: globalisation. Clearly when a concept attains such fame we can expect that it will be stretched, that it may begin to mean all things to all people, that the term will, as Fine argues, take on a 'nebulous character'. As one group of commentators recently noted: 'The term social capital has taken on so many meanings and been enlisted to fight so many battles that it is at risk of becoming the ether that fills the universe' (Robinson et al 2002:1). Fine's criticism is both that the concept has been so stretched as to become meaningless, and despite this popular usage it continues to carry with it

significant methodological and normative baggage. Most importantly, it is the marker of what Fine refers to as the 'new economics imperialism', leading those in other social sciences and beyond to attempt to 'improve' their own work and arguments by imposing market-based logics and methodologies on non-market actors, institutions and interactions.

These two ideas of concept-stretching and methodological and normative inference are contradictory. If, in fact, the concept has been applied so loosely as to become almost meaningless, how could it have such a profound influence on the way we approach the world? Does the term 'capital' matched with 'social' carry such powerful connotations? Smith and Kulynych (2002) have recently argued that the very term 'social capital' is problematic because of its roots in economic discourse and its clear association with capitalism. Others, including Arrow (1999) and Solow (1999), have also sharply criticised the capital metaphor and suggested the abolition of social capital. Fine seems to support these criticisms. Smith and Kulynch explicitly state that the term needs to be replaced with another; they suggest 'social capacity'. But this suggestion seems to miss the mountain for the molehill. There is a much broader problem that was also clearly evident in the debates concerning civil society, a term often erroneously employed as synonymous to social capital but which has today largely been eclipsed by social capital.

The term civil society, though widely used, stretched and overused, also seemed to carry distinctive normative baggage. It was, as is the case with social capital today, generally equated either with democracy or the quest for democratic government. Proponents of civil society far too frequently conflated its expected effects with its very existence, arguing that civil society brings about and reinforces democracy but that civil society is also a measure of democracy (Zuern 2000). Portes has noted the same problem in many studies of social capital: while social capital is understood to bring about better governance, to lead to more effective policies, it has also often been measured by better governance and more effective policies (2000:4). Such circular reasoning clearly does little to further our understanding of the linkages between associational life and better governance, however defined. If social capital is measured not by outcomes but by counting associations, the trouble becomes which types of associations actually count.

Two points are worth underlining here: first, the importance of context; and, second, the specific biases of employing either civil society or social

capital in an African context. Fine importantly notes the problem of context, referring to social capital as both asocial and ahistorical. This is a crucial point, and one which has received significant attention in critiques of both civil society and social capital (Foley and Edwards 1996; Mamdani 1996; Young 1994; Berman 2001; Booth and Richard 2001; Edwards et al 2001; Maloney et al 2001; Portney and Berry 2001; Rose 2001; Smith and Kulynych 2002). By simply taking a descriptive concept from one context and applying it to another, any difference in the second context is quickly perceived as a shortcoming.

This is a particularly vexing problem when applying social capital to sub-Saharan Africa because, for better or worse, sub-Saharan Africa stands out in the so-called era of globaliation for its marginalisation (Ake 1994). This is the vast region that the Western world cumulatively seems to know the least about and therefore feels most comfortable imposing its own images (darkness) and ideals (modernisation) upon (Keim 1999; Mudimbe 1988). The search for social capital in sub-Saharan Africa therefore easily turns into a critique of local communities and wider societies, with an understanding that if they only looked a bit more like those in the advanced capitalist West, many problems could be overcome.

Fine offers a quotation from Robert Bates (current p9) in which Bates equates social capital (the right associational networks) and modernisation. Unfortunately, Bates does not stand alone here. Francis Fukuyama (2002: 34) is even more explicit in his quest for modernity by employing the right forms of social capital in the developing world:

> Most developing countries actually have an abundance of social capital in the form of kinship groups like lineages, tribes, or village associations. What they lack are more modern, broad-radius organizations that connect across traditional ethnic, class, or status boundaries and serve as the basis for modern political and economic organizations. Seen from this perspective, many traditional groups embodying one form of social capital can actually be obstacles to development, because they are too insular or resistant to change. What is often needed, therefore, is some creative destruction of social capital, and the gradual broadening of the radius of trust on the part of the more modern organization.

So it is not just about finding social capital, but the right social capital, which interestingly looks much like the idealised bowling leagues and choral societies that Putnam (1993, 2001) lauded in Italy and the United States. As Hyden has succinctly argued: 'The notion that social capital is

made up of a common currency of civicness ... is both ethnocentric and misleading for policy and governance purposes' (2001:161). Our concern should then be less as to how social capital is defined (if it includes both 'productive' and 'unproductive' associations and networks) but rather as to how the concept is employed. The danger of social capital, as Fine rightly argues, is not that it represents something new but that it supports old conceptions or frameworks of understanding the world. Even though a belief in the powers of capitalism clearly fuels the ideal of modernisation, this connection between modernisation and social capital (or civil society) cannot be transcended by merely finding a new term. The focus on social capital, as well as the methodologies commonly employed in studies of social capital, is too narrow.

Other critics have demonstrated the exclusive nature of social capital, argued that the language of social capital works to legitimate capitalism and to undermine participatory approaches to democracy (Smith and Kulynch 2002), that Putnam (and many subsequent investigations of social capital) actually removes politics from the discussion of political life (Levi 1996), that the discourse of social capital lays the blame for social ills on the masses, ignoring the power of the state and elite actors (Skocpol 1996), and that treatments of social capital have led to tautological arguments and the demonstration of spurious correlations (Portes 1998, 2000).

Fine has extended the debate by casting a wider net. Importantly, he demonstrates both the methodological and practical implications of the common approach to social capital in development studies. He is exactly right to point to the imperialism of economics as expressed in social capital, but by focusing on social capital he is perhaps drawing too much attention to the use of a singular, though popular and arguably powerful, concept. If social capital were removed from academic, policy and popular discourses, the underlying pressures and interest in making African (and other) societies look more like an idealised image of the West would remain. This is why so nebulous a concept can appear to have such a directed impact; it builds upon a consistent conception of modernisation and the shape of modernity.

There is a clear need to press the debate further. The individualist approach ironically inherent in social capital is not only a feature of social capital, its employment in social capital analyses demonstrates that this approach has conquered greater space in the social sciences and policy analysis. Simply critiquing or dismissing the term social capital does not

address the underlying concerns raised by the very critics who argue against employing the concept. Any new term that aspires to the same universality will be subject to the same biases.

One of the great disappointments in the debates around the use and abuse of social capital has been the general lack of reference to Bourdieu's work. Most writers, as Fine points out, who employ the term today have adopted it from Putnam and thus only look back to Coleman. Even in a case such as Edwards, Foley and Diani's (2001) edited volume on social capital, in which the editors explicitly state the need to return to the insights of Bourdieu, his (Bourdieu's) work is barely explored. The contributors are so concerned with critiquing Putnam on Putnam's terms that they seem unable to move beyond Putnam. Putnam's approach to social capital has clearly become hegemonic. While Fine is duly dubious regarding the impact that simply reintroducing Bourdieu's concept may have upon social capital debates and approaches to development, any steps to frame the analysis of social capital within a broader context of power relations, including questions of class, status, and conflict, would be a significant step forward.

Civil society and social capital both importantly have drawn attention to popular associations and networks of action and interaction, but the danger is that a focus on this level of analysis often isolates associations or networks from the broader environment within which they function. Social capital clearly appeals to many development professionals because it offers a way to understand and measure social relations. It is this act of simplification, a reduction of the 'messiness of social reality' (Beall 2001) along with the belief in the universal application of a concept and approach that is so dangerous.

What we need is not a new term, perhaps not even another critique of the concept of social capital, but rather a reintroduction to the very messiness of politics at all levels of analysis. Debates that continue to focus on social capital while failing to engage other actors, relations and structures, do little to encourage a wider perspective. Any investigation of social capital on its own, isolated as if functioning in its own universe, is bound to lead to erroneous conclusions.

We need to shift our focus from arguments concerning the definition of the concept of social capital to the broader conception of social capital as a tool of development. This is why the works that Fine cites, which mention – but do not seem to engage – the concept of social capital are still relevant

to our analysis. Deleting the words 'social capital' from our vocabulary, even if this were possible and this is dubious, would only further marginalise and balkanise the valuable criticisms of current approaches, and strengthen the hegemonic position of Putnam's conception of social capital and, with it, how politics works. Fine has moved from simply addressing the concept to engaging the wider conceptions of development that its use demonstrates; this is an important step in what will clearly be an ongoing debate.

Note

1. In a previous article, Fine (2002b) did explicitly call for the rejection of the term: 'The most appropriate answer to social capital is to reject it altogether and to construct a rigorous theory of the social and of capital and of capitalism, building upon the intellectual traditions that we have rather than reducing them to fashionable concepts inspired by a disguised rational choice'.

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