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The Myth of Social Capital in Community Development

James DeFilippis
King's College, London

Abstract

This article argues that contemporary interest in social capital by community development theorists, funders, and practitioners is misguided and needs to be thoroughly rethought. It argues that social capital, as understood by Robert Putnam and people influenced by his work, is a fundamentally flawed concept because it fails to understand issues of power in the production of communities and because it is divorced from economic capital. Therefore, community development practice based on this understanding of social capital is, and will continue to be, similarly flawed.

The article further argues that instead of Putnam's understanding of social capital, community development practice would be better served by returning to the way the concept was used by Glenn Loury and Pierre Bourdieu and concludes with a discussion of how these alternative theories of social capital can be realized in community development practice.

Keywords: Development/revitalization; Urban environment

Introduction

The extremely rapid rise of social capital is one of the dominant trends in American social science and public policy over the past decade, and this is particularly true of work in housing and community development. This was obvious at the spring 1999 meeting of the Urban Affairs Association in Louisville, KY. Social capital was the organizing theme of the conference, and emphasis was placed on how social capital can be generated in low-income communities in the United States. If the meeting was any indication, social capital had, in only about half a decade, become one of the principal concerns of community development practitioners and researchers. Shortly thereafter, two students walked into their high school in the affluent suburb of Littleton, CO, and began shooting their classmates. This tragic event sparked debates in American public life, among them the issue of the isolation and alienation of much of suburban life (Hamilton 1999; Schiff 1999).

Of course, this was not a new criticism to be lodged against the suburbs; people have been making it for quite some time (Friedan 1963; Jackson 1985; Langdon 1994; Wood 1958). But, the feeling of isolation in affluent suburbs (which are now only a segment of the much more race- and class-diverse suburban world) took on new strength in the 1990s and resulted in, among other things, the rapid growth of both the cohousing and New Urbanist movements (Hanson 1996; Katz 1994; Knack 1996; McCamant and Durrett 1988; Muschamp 1996; Talen 1999).

But, this sense of isolation presents a problem. If people who are affluent in the United States are struggling with social disconnectedness and isolation, why are people who are concerned with economic development in low-income areas emphasizing the importance of social connections and networks as a way of moving low-income people and communities out of poverty? There seems, in short, to be disjuncture between, on the one hand, the experiences of the affluent and, on the other, the prescriptions for the poor in American life. This disjuncture, in and of itself, should lead people to question the utility of the social capital framework in community economic development.

This article will discuss the meanings and uses of social capital and argue that its recently acquired privileged position in community economic development is misguided. To be specific, however, this article is not an argument that social capital does not matter or that it is not an important component in the production and reproduction of individual success and class status. Instead, the argument is that we need to be very careful about how we define and use the term social capital. Social capital is an "elastic term" (Moore Lappe and Du Bois 1997, 119), with a variety of meanings. But the understanding of social capital that has become incorporated into community development theory and practice is the social capital of Robert Putnam (1993a, 1993b, 1995, 1996, 1998, 2000), in which the term is both combined with notions of civil society and assumed to be a principal engine of economic growth and democratic government. Putnam's arguments, however, are deeply flawed and have little empirical or theoretical support, so community development work informed by his framework will be similarly flawed and misguided. Before making these arguments, however, this article will briefly discuss the concept of social capital and how it has evolved through its use by Loury (1977), Bourdieu (1985), Coleman (1988) and then, ultimately, Putnam (1993a, 1993b, 1995, 1996, 2000) and his followers.

What is social capital?[1]

While time and space constraints do not permit a thorough description of the enormous literature on social capital that has emerged in the past seven or so years (Chupp 1999; Fine 2001; Foley and Edwards 1997, 1998; Portes 1998; Wills 2000), it is important to briefly describe the different meanings given to the term. It is unclear who first used the term, but an important early use came from Loury (1977) in a book chapter

[1] This section borrows heavily from Portes's presidential address to the American Sociological Association (1998).

that criticized the narrowly individualistic and atomistic understanding of human capital in neoclassical economic theory. He wrote:

> The social context within which individual maturation occurs strongly conditions what otherwise equally competent individuals can achieve. This implies that absolute equality of opportunity, where an individual's chance to succeed depends only on his or her innate capabilities, is an ideal that cannot be achieved.…An individual's social origin has an obvious and important effect on the amount of resources that is ultimately invested in his or her development. It may thus be useful to employ a concept of "social capital" to represent the consequences of social position in facilitating acquisition of the standard human capital characteristics. (Loury 1977, 176)

Loury was unquestionably right in this assessment, and certainly someone growing up in East New York, Brooklyn, or the South Side of Chicago is not starting from the same position as someone growing up in Greenwich, CT, or Glencoe, IL. This is stating the obvious. But Loury needed to make the argument because this apparently self-evident statement of reality was clearly not self-evident to human capital theorists who, following Becker (1957, 1964), had come to dominate labor theories in American economics. Human capital formation, instead of being understood as the inherently social process that it is—for example, no one goes to school in isolation from the context in which that school is located, administered, or funded—had come to be almost completely about individual achievement or lack of it.

A concurrently developed theory of social capital came from French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1985),[2] who is relatively underused in the current literature on social capital in community development. This is unfortunate because his is probably the most theoretically useful and sophisticated attempt to deal with the issue. Bourdieu's (1985) use of the term social capital is an explicit attempt to understand the production of classes and class divisions. Social capital, while being constituted by social networks and relationships, is never disconnected from *capital*. Capital, for Bourdieu (1985), is simultaneously both economic and a set of power relations that constitute a variety of realms and social interactions normally thought of as noneconomic. Two key components of his work have been lost in current discussions of social capital. First, the production, and reproduction, of capital is a process that is inherently about power. In fact, Bourdieu's (1985) conception of capital is such that he almost conceives of capital and power as synonymous. Second, since his interest is in the social production of classes, he distinguishes between the social networks that an individual is embedded in, and out of which social capital precipitates (or emerges), and the outcomes of those social relationships. That is, social networks should not simply be equated to the products of those social relationships, for doing so would ren-

[2] Similarly, this section draws heavily on the work of Fine (1998, 1999, 2001).

der invisible social networks that might be very dense but nonetheless unable to generate resources because of lack of access.

Despite these earlier efforts, the person who brought social capital into the mainstream in the American social sciences was clearly James Coleman (1988), who argued:

> Social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors…within the structure. Like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible. Like physical and human capital, social capital is not completely fungible but may be specific to certain activities. A given form of social capital that is valuable in facilitating certain actions may be useless or even harmful for others. Unlike other forms of capital, social capital inheres in the structure of relations between actors and among actors. (S98)

With this rather "fuzzy" definition (Markusen 1999; Portes 1998), Coleman (1988) then defines different sets of actions, outcomes, and relationships as social capital. Social capital for him is inherently functional, and social capital is whatever allows people or institutions to act. Social capital is therefore not a mechanism, a thing, or an outcome, but simultaneously any or all of them. Portes (1998) sees this as a vital step in the evolution and proliferation of the idea of social capital and states: "Coleman himself started that proliferation by including under the term some of the mechanisms that generated social capital; the consequences of its possession; and the 'appropriable' social organization that provided the context for both sources and effects to materialize" (5). Finally, social capital, for Coleman (1988), is normatively and morally neutral. That is, it is neither desirable nor undesirable; it simply allows actions to take place by providing the needed resources.

Putnam and the proliferation of social capital theory

Although Coleman's 1988 work brought social capital into use in the social sciences, the principal source of the idea for community development practitioners and researchers is Robert Putnam (1993a, 1993b, 1995, 1996, 2000). With his work, social capital is thoroughly redefined and becomes extremely influential in development studies, both in the United States (Gittell and Vidal 1998; Lang and Hornburg 1998; Miller 1997; Moore Lappe and Du Bois 1997; Schulgasser 1999; Servon 1999; Temkin and Rohe 1998; Wallis 1998; Wallis, Crocker, and Schechter 1998; Wilson 1997) and internationally. In fact, to many people in the World Bank, social capital has become "the missing link" in global economic development (Harriss and de Renzio 1997). Describing the impact of Putnam's social capital on community development, Chupp bluntly states, “In the debate over poor neighborhoods and the ills of society as a whole, social capital has become something of a wonder drug” (1999, 2). Further, Putnam’s redefinition of social capital is almost as dramatic as the widespread impact of his argument, and it therefore requires considerable discussion here. This article argues that with Putnam’s redefinition, social capital ceases to be a useful framework for local or community economic development.

There are several key transitions that occur when Putnam first uses the term social capital in *Making Democracy Work* (1993a), his book on Italian politics. And while he has expanded and developed his views since then, he has not fundamentally altered them. First, social capital is transformed from something realized by individuals to something possessed (or not possessed) by either individuals *or* groups of people in regions, communities, cities, countries, or continents. Second, it is conflated with civil society, or more accurately, with a particular neo-Tocquevillean view of civil society. Thus, voluntary, nongovernment associations, based on trust, become the institutions through which social capital is generated. Third, it becomes primarily a normatively good thing and is given credit for (a) promoting good, democratic government and (b) generating and sustaining economic growth and development. Finally, when Putnam brings this framework to the American context, he does so by making the argument that social capital and civil society are declining in the United States and have been since the mid-1960s (1993b, 1995, 1996, 2000) and that this trend portends long-term economic and political trouble. These issues will be addressed in turn, before turning to the problems with them and their applications in community development efforts.

Loury (1977), Bourdieu (1985), and Coleman (1988) all argued that social capital is not embodied in any particular person, but rather is embedded in people’s social relationships. At the same time, however, they also stated that social capital was *realized* by individuals. Putnam, conversely, has argued that social capital is a resource that individuals or groups of people possess or fail to possess (Portes 1998; Portes and Landolt 1996). At the outset of his first article on the issue, he states, “Working together is easier in a community blessed with a substantial stock of social capital” (Putnam 1993b, 36). Communities, not people, possess “stocks” of social capital. He has since made this transition from the individual to the larger group more explicit and states, “Social capital can thus be simultaneously a ‘private good’ and a ‘public good’ ” (Putnam 2000, 20). What is important to note is that despite his emphasis on social networks and his moving social capital from the scale of the individual to the scale of the group, Putnam measures social capital with a form of methodological individualism (Skocpol 1996). In his research on social capital in the United States, Putnam (1995, 1996, 2000) uses social survey data to observe the level of social involvement of individuals and then simply aggregates up from there to whatever scale is being observed. While this might seem a trivial observation, it is, as will be demonstrated later, key to his, and his followers', understanding of "community."

Coleman's (1988) definition, by its lack of clarity, left the door open for a variety of sources of social capital, and Putnam uses that vagueness to seize on trust-based voluntary associations (one of the several examples Coleman offers), and his understanding of them as the constituents of civil society, as the key source of social capital for communities, regions, and so on. Putnam argues that "*social capital* refers to the norms and networks of civil society that lubricate cooperative action among both citizens and their institutions" (1998, v; emphasis in the original). Social capital and civil society therefore become conflated, and the two are almost synonymous. This transition has dramatic implications for the political and theoretical understandings of social capital.

This view of social capital and civil society, unlike Coleman's (1988), Loury's (1977), and Bourdieu's (1985), is one in which they are largely assumed to be a normatively good thing. While Putnam certainly recognizes that there are potentially "negative" forms of social capital, the overwhelming balance of his work is about its benefits. And he argues that they are, in fact, necessary for the functioning of both a responsive democratic government and the economic growth and well-being of places. He states:

> An impressive and growing body of research suggests that civic connections help make us healthy, wealthy and wise. Living without social capital is not easy, whether one is a villager in southern Italy or a poor person in the American inner city or a well-heeled entrepreneur in a high-tech industrial district. (Putnam 2000, 287)

This understanding of civil society and social capital has its roots in Putnam's reading of Alexis de Tocqueville's (1835) view of civil society and democracy, and it is therefore necessary to take a moment to discuss this perspective. De Tocqueville visited the United States in the 1830s and believed that one of the defining components of *Democracy in America* (1835) was the propensity of Americans to create and join voluntary associations that were in the domains of neither the state nor the market. Putnam acknowledges his debt to de Tocqueville and states, "Recently, American social scientists of a neo-Tocquevillean bent have unearthed a wide range of empirical evidence that the quality of public life and the performance of social institutions are indeed powerfully influenced by norms and networks of civic engagement" (1995, 66). His reading of de Tocqueville strongly suggests that networks of trust and voluntary associations are "win-win" sets of relationships in which everyone involved benefits. This is evident in his basic definition of the idea. He states, "Social capital refers to connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called 'civic virtue'" (Putnam 2000, 19). Voluntary associations, therefore, are not confrontational encounters based on vested interests, but rather "features of social life—networks, norms, and trust—that enable participants to come together to *pursue shared objectives*" (Putnam 1996, 34; emphasis added). Bowling leagues, PTAs, Elks Clubs, church groups, and trade unions (Putnam 1995) are therefore theoretically, politically, and morally comparable. Even though he examines them individually in his recent book (Putnam 2000), they all perform very similar functions.

But, the benefits of social capital and civil society extend beyond simply promoting and supporting democratic institutions of government to generating and sustaining economic growth. Putnam argues, "Studies of the rapidly growing economies of East Asia almost always emphasize the importance of dense social networks, so that these economies are sometimes said to represent a new brand of 'network capitalism'" (1993a, 38). At his boldest (referring to the Italian case), he states, "These communities did not become civic simply because they were rich. The historical record suggests precisely the opposite: They have become rich because they were civic.…Development economists take note: civics matters" (1993a, 37). And most recently he states, "Where trust and social networks flourish, individuals, firms, neighborhoods and even nations prosper" (Putnam 2000, 319). It is this understanding of social capital—that it is central to the economic development of communities and regions and nations—which has inspired its rapid incorporation into the community economic development literature in the United States and the underdeveloped world.

Putnam became famous, however, not simply as a neo-Tocquevillean, but as someone who documented the decline in civil society and social capital in the United States. His thesis has been much discussed, so it need not be dealt with in any detail here. Briefly, he has argued (Putnam 1995, 1996, 2000) that the United States has witnessed a withdrawal from civil society and a decline in social capital. He argues that the decline of social capital is a generational process in which people who were born in the 1910s and 1920s were (and are) more civicly engaged than their counterparts who were born from the 1930s on. He accordingly dates this withdrawal as having begun in the early to mid-1960s.

Putnam's followers in community development[3]

Putnam and his arguments have rapidly become central to the research and practice of community development in the United States. One of the striking things about this explosion of research and practice around his view of social capital and civil society is how it has largely ignored

[3] The phrase "Putnam's followers" is borrowed from Gittell and Vidal (1998).

an enormous volume of research and literature by academics (Edwards and Foley 1997, 1998; Fine 1998, 1999, 2000; Foley and Edwards 1997, 1998; Galston 1996; Portes 1998; Portes and Landolt 1996; Schudson 1996; Skocpol 1996), people in the popular press (Lemann 1996; Pollitt 1996), and activists (Bowles 1999; Durlauf 1999) who have criticized almost every component of these arguments. Instead, much work in community development is broadly accepting of Putnam's arguments about the importance of social capital, understood as voluntary associations and civic trust, in the promotion of economic growth and prosperity. In fact, to some researchers, Putnam's views have become almost axiomatic, and in the first sentence in her article on social capital Wilson unambiguously states: "Social capital creates local economic prosperity" (1997, 745). In their introduction to a special issue of *Housing Policy Debate* devoted solely to social capital, Lang and Hornburg (1998) reiterate Putnam's arguments and state:

> Political scientist Robert Putnam expanded and ultimately popularized the concept of social capital. Putnam originally applied the idea to a study of Italian regional governments. He showed that the key element underlying the difference between Tuscany's successful regional government and Sicily's failed one was the degree of "civic engagement."…Putnam also argued that social capital is connected to economic development. Tuscany's high level of social capital elevates its standard of living. It provides the region a social environment in which productive cooperation in all spheres of civic life is possible. *Thus, social capital promotes economic growth.* (3; emphasis added)

Similarly, when the Urban Affairs Association held its annual conference in 1999, it was titled "The Social Reconstruction of the City: Social Capital and Community Building." This is certainly not to suggest that everyone at the meetings accepted Putnam's arguments, but rather to observe that his work provided the very framework and context for discussions. Foundations have similarly incorporated Putnam's arguments into their work, and both the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) and the Mott Foundation have made the construction of social capital a central component of their antipoverty and community development frameworks. (See Gittell and Vidal [1998] and Wallis, Crocker, and Schechter [1998] respectively, for thorough discussions of these two funding initiatives.) In the case of LISC, this has yielded a perspective on community development organizing that stresses "nonconfrontational" methods, and an incorporation of Michael Eichler's framework of "consensus organizing" (Gittell and Vidal 1998, 2). Given that social capital is being understood as both a set of win-win relationships based on mutual interest and a promoter of economic prosperity and development, this is a logical way for community organizers and community development practitioners to operate. Thus, Putnam's view of social capital and voluntary civic associations is being played out in the streets of American cities. The problem with all of this is that social capital, as Putnam has defined and operationalized it, does not necessarily promote community economic development (or, for that matter, democratic government).

The problems with Putnam and his followers

Returning to the way Putnam transformed the idea of social capital, I will now present the theoretical and empirical flaws in his analysis and argue that if we are to use the notion of social capital in community development we would be much better served by returning to how it was understood by Loury (1977) or Bourdieu (1985). I will go through Putnam's transformations of social capital in the same order that they were presented.

Individuals, communities, and power

First, Putnam defines social capital as something that is possessed, or not possessed, by individuals, communities, cities, nations, etc. He and his followers then measure its existence by simply taking individual attributes and aggregating up to the scale being measured. There are two problems with this argument and its associated methodology. First, places are not things. A community cannot *possess* anything. An institution or an individual can possess something, but a community cannot. Instead, communities are products of complicated sets of social, political, cultural, and economic relationships (DeFilippis 1999; Massey 1994). Communities are outcomes, not actors. They are, however, outcomes that affect and constrain future possibilities. Communities unquestionably matter, but they are not actors that exhibit any form of agency. This might seem like a semantic argument, but this first problem leads to the second one. That is, no place (a community, a region, or whatever) is solely a function of the internal attributes of the people living and working there. If communities are outcomes, they are not simply outcomes of the characteristics of those within them, they are also outcomes of a complex set of power-laden relationships—both internally, within the communities, and externally, between actors in the communities and the rest of the world. Citibank (for instance) and its lending practices, state governments and their education financing policies, and communities in other countries with soon-to-be emigrants are all very real examples of how America's urban communities are products of a whole host of relations that extend geographically well beyond the place of the community. These relations are often contentious (school funding issues is a classic example) and are always imbued with issues of power. Only by ignoring these vitally important, power-laden connections can we assume that communities are the products of the attributes of the individuals who live and work in them. Similarly, only by ignoring these connections can we assume that we can move from the level of the individual to the level of community (or city, or region) or that individual gains and profits are the same as group, or community, gains and profits.

Putnam does try to get at this reality with his concept of "bridging capital" (1995, 1996, 2000), which has been generally accepted within the community development work that has followed him. But once we accept the complexity of the internal and external relationships that produce a community, we clearly need something more than bridging capital as the means to economic development. For instance, individuals in exurban gated communities of Orange County, CA, and indeed in much of the rest of the country are largely devoid of bridging capital (at the community level). As Putnam himself states in his brief discussion of gated communities, "Not only are canvassing politicians and Girl Scouts selling cookies excluded from exclusive communities, but the affluent residents themselves also appear to have a surprisingly low rate of civic engagement and neighborliness even within their boundaries" (2000, 210). The importance of this example is that not only are these communities disconnected, but they are also usually exceedingly wealthy. The relationships that produce gated communities are based on the protection of their affluence through their class- and race-based social and geographic isolation from much, if not most, of the metropolitan areas around them. It is not connections that partially produce and reproduce their wealth, but exactly the opposite: *isolation*. Connections, or "bridges" do not, of themselves, make the people in any place rich or poor. The important question is, Who controls the terms of any relationships or connections (or lack of connections)? "Bridging capital" is really needed only if a community's residents are poor and therefore on the losing end of a set of power relations. What needs to change are those power relations, not the level of connections.

Social capital and civil society

The second transition that Putnam makes is to confuse social capital with a particular neo-Tocquevillean reading of civil society. This transition has two important implications for community development practice. First, this reading of civil society assumes that social capital and civil society are almost always good things that enable people to act toward their shared interests and goals, based on the trust, norms, and values that develop through their associations. But this is, at best, a highly selective reading of civil society. Putnam bases his understanding of civil society on the popular simplification of the views de Tocqueville expressed in 1835 in *Democracy in America*. But de Tocqueville's view of civil society is both much more complex than Putnam and his followers acknowledge, and further, it is but one in a very long, and highly contested, history of debate about civil society in Western thought. As Foley and Edwards correctly observe:

> Tocqueville argues that America's associational life springs from the twin social and political conditions of the new nation—and those conditions are, in his eyes and those of his intended audience, inherently problematic. The social condition, the relatively egalitarian character of American society, plays an explicit role in Tocqueville's account of the genesis of American associationism. The political freedoms Americans enjoy play a generally supporting role, but an essential one. American egalitarianism poses serious problems for public life to de Tocqueville's mind…a general leveling promotes mediocrity and conformism.…Associations arise to fill these deficiencies. (1997, 554)

De Tocqueville's voluntary associations arose as win-win situations precisely because the interests of the people involved were shared. De Tocqueville visited the United States before the emergence of industrial capitalism and the classes it created. Also, there is little doubt that if slaves had been allowed to participate in such associations (which they clearly were not), then the image of voluntary associations would be a very different one indeed. Putnam's view is possible only if you erase the very real material interests that divide us (and even then, it is still questionable) and create a vision of civil society as solely constituted by people and groups with mutual interests. That is why Putnam lumps trade unions together with PTAs and church groups and views them as comparable (1993b, 1995, 1996). If he had included local Chambers of Commerce with local unions, the implausibility of his argument would have been even clearer. This understanding of voluntary associations as win-win relationships also allows him to ignore the power relations that play such an important role in intergroup relations. Simply put, certain social networks are in greater positions of power than others, and they can therefore yield much more substantial returns to their members when those networks are engaged in social or political conflict. Given that people in low-income areas are marginalized in the American political economy, this is a substantial omission—and limiting factor—in the potential uses of Putnam's social capital framework in community organizing and development.

The second important aspect of conflating social capital with civil society is that it divorces social capital from *capital* itself. But for *social capital* to have any meaning, it must remain connected to the production and reproduction of capital in society. This is striking because it is the role of social capital in community *economic* development that should be of the greatest importance to community development practitioners. Community development is about many things, but central to them must be the economic security and progress of people in low-income communities and the economic development of the communities themselves. But given Putnam's separation of social capital from economics, it is not surprising that the economic impact of Putnam's social capital is so difficult to observe and measure. This is because it might not even exist.

Social capital and economic growth

Putnam argues that social capital and civil society (comprised of voluntary associations) promote economic growth (1993a, 1993b, 1995, 1996, 1998, 2000). But there is little theoretical or empirical support for this assertion. His own examples, aside from Italy, which is beyond the scope of this article (his interpretation of Italian politics and economics has been called into question by other specialists on Italy; see Goldberg [1996], Harriss and de Renzio [1997], Sabetti [1996], and Tarrow [1996] for summaries of these criticisms), betray the problems in his own argument. Putnam uses the examples of immigrant enclaves in American cities, the "network capitalism" of East and Southeast Asia, and the "erosion of social capital" (Putnam 1993b, 39) in our inner cities as examples that social capital generates economic growth (or, inversely, that the lack of social capital arrests economic growth). The first two of these will be addressed now, and the third shortly.

First, Putnam is certainly right that social ties based on trust and networks among immigrants have helped them prosper in the United States. That has been a feature of the immigrant experience for quite some time. But again, because he views communities as coherent wholes, internally defined and detached from other sets of communities, he fails to see the impact of these networks in any larger context. Coleman's (1988) often cited example, which Putnam and his followers draw on, is that of the diamond industry in New York and how market transactions involving large quantities of jewels are facilitated by the social networks of trust within the Jewish community that controls the industry. Aside from the complete denial of the exploitation that takes place *within* ethnic enclave economies (Waldinger 1986), the problem with this, and every other enclave like it, is that it completely closes off the market, and access to the market, to anyone who is not part of the ethnic group creating the enclave. A brilliant, hard-working, innovative Irish Catholic immigrant (for instance) who wanted to enter the diamond trade in New York City would have an exceptionally difficult time doing so. Or to move from the hypothetical to the real, as a result of large flows of capital into the real estate market in New York, Harlem has been experiencing substantial development in recent years. This should be a good thing and beneficial to black contractors and workers in the community. The reality, however, is that the construction industry in New York is controlled by an immigrant enclave (in this case Italians), and so the contracting firms and their employees in Harlem have been largely excluded from the dollars and jobs that this investment has brought (Siegal 2000).

The response to this example could be that Harlem contractors simply need to be better connected or have more substantial stocks of "bridging capital," but that would miss the point, which is this: If social capital as sets of networks means anything, it means that some people will be connected and others will not. Simply put, if there is one job, and everyone is connected to the same networks and realizes the same benefits of social capital, then you cease to have the kinds of networks that Putnam and Coleman are talking about. Instead you have the pure market of Adam Smith's theorizations. If everyone is connected, then everyone by definition would lose the benefits of those connections because they would no longer gain capital from them (in this case, the job). Putnam observes, "It is no accident that one of the pervasive strategems of ambitious yuppies is 'networking'" (1993b, 38). But what he fails to realize is that yuppies network precisely to get ahead of everyone else. If they shared the fruits of their networking with others, they would cease to be ambitious and become charitable instead. They would, in fact, not only be acting charitably, but acting against their own self-interest. This is one of the primary reasons why it is simply untenable to move from the level of the individual to the level of community in issues of economics. For social capital to make sense as a concept in a market economy, then networks, formal or informal, must operate in the competitive realm of market relations. And while the individuals in such a network might share common interests that allow them to act as a network, these networks, because of the competitive nature of capitalism, cannot be extended to everyone in society. Max Weber, the influential sociologist and political economist, wrote at length in 1925 on the role of social networks in economics in *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* and is instructive on this point. He stated:

> [A relationship] is especially likely to be closed, for rational reasons, in the following type of situation: a social relationship may provide the parties to it with opportunities for satisfaction of various interests, whether the satisfactions be spiritual or material....If the participants expect the admission of others will lead to an improvement of their situation...their interest will be in keeping the relationship open. If, on the other hand, their expectations are of improving their position by monopolistic tactics, their interest is in a closed relationship. (Weber 1993 edition, 139–40)

If the social capital in question is a network that helps people find employment (or get into the right prep school, or whatever), it would clearly be in the interest of those realizing and appropriating the social capital (the job or place in the school) to keep the network as closed as possible. This is precisely what the ethnic enclave economies have demonstrated. To have any value as a term, social capital must retain a connection to economic capital, and it must therefore be premised on the ability of certain people to realize it at the expense of others. While economics is not a zero-sum game, it is also not simply a set of win-win relationships.

But the economic shortcomings of social capital extend beyond its necessary exclusions and into the realm of economic unsustainability. Putnam consistently celebrates in his articles the emergence of "network capitalism" in East and Southeast Asia and argues that these countries demonstrate the validity of his point that networks of trust and mutual interest generate economic growth (1993b, 1995, 1996, 1998). The problem with this example is that by the middle of 1997, the East Asian and Southeast Asian economies had collapsed, and by the end of 1997, much of the economic world had decided that the cause of the collapse was "crony capitalism" ("How Far Is Down?" 1997; "A Lorry-Load of Trouble in Asia" 1997; "Asia and the Abyss" 1997).

In short, the networks of trust and mutual cooperation in Asia that Putnam is so supportive of were taken to their logical conclusion of irrational economic actions inspired by economic decisions that were made with a logic other than economics at heart. This is probably why in his recent book Putnam (2000) no longer points to this example. And this is precisely why Adam Smith in his 1776 *Wealth of Nations* argued so strongly against the kinds of social networks among economic actors that Putnam and his followers now celebrate. Smith argued that such relationships were akin to monopolization and would necessarily generate a group whose "interest is, in this respect, directly opposite to that of the great body of the people" (1993 edition, 307). In fact, he argued that too much trust between economic actors was a recipe for economy-stifling cartels and monopolizations—a prediction that seems to have been borne out by the experience in Asia. Similar concerns were again voiced by Weber in 1925, but his criticisms went beyond simple exclusions and monopolizations to stress that such trust-based networks further distort and hamper growth within the economy by inviting free-riders from within the relationships not to work as hard as they might, or have to, if they were not connected.

But, the biggest flaw in Putnam's argument comes not from East Asia or the theories of political economists, but from the empirical realities of American life. Three components of Putnam's arguments with regard to social capital and economic prosperity are important here: first, that social capital promotes economic growth; second, that social capital is declining in the United States and has been since the early to mid-1960s; third, that inner-city areas lack social capital, which is one of the principal reasons they are poor. I will address these arguments in turn.

In perhaps the most thorough cross-country empirical examination of the relationship between social capital and national economic wealth—one that Putnam cites as supporting his argument—Knack and Keefer (1997) find a statistically significant positive relationship between levels of trust in a society and rates of economic growth. This is not surprising, since trust at the level of the society should limit the costs of economic transactions within any given society. Important for this discussion, however, they also found that "associational activity is not correlated with economic performance" (Knack and Keefer 1997, 1252) and that “promoting horizontal associations through encouraging the formation of and participation in groups may be counterproductive, according to our findings” (Knack and Keefer 1997, 1284).

Within the United States, the evidence is not any more convincing. In his recent book, Putnam (2000) constructs a “Comprehensive Social Capital Index” in which each state is ranked along a spectrum of very high to very low in terms of social capital. Of the 10 states he ranks as having the highest social capital in the country, only 3 have a per capita income higher than the per capita income for the entire country (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000). Also, the mean per capita income of those 10 states is only 93.9 percent of the country’s per capita income. Clearly, there are many explanations for why these states are significantly poorer than the nation as a whole, and it is definitely not the argument here that social capital hinders economic prosperity. But if social capital is important in promoting economic prosperity, then surely the data would look different from this.

The decline of social capital?

Moving on to the second argument, that social capital is declining in the United States, the question asked here is, What segments of the population is this most true for? After sifting the evidence, Putnam unambiguously states, “The central fact is that by virtually all measures of civic disengagement and all measures of socioeconomic status, the trends are very similar at all levels” (2000, 194). But if this is true, the question becomes, Why are the American elites, who have gone through 35 years of civic disengagement, doing so incredibly well financially? Where is the economic impact of their disengagement? Affluent and professional Americans have enjoyed a virtually unprecedented period of prolonged prosperity, and the current gap in wealth between rich and poor is greater than it has been since before the Great Depression. Putnam’s theory just does not make sense in, let alone explain, this reality.

Aside from the incredible growth in the wealth of rich people and the stagnation in the wealth of poor people—even though both groups have had their social capital decline by comparable amounts—Putnam’s arguments still run afoul of basic empirical realities in the United States. That is, social capital is supposed to have declined for 35 years. Where is the economic impact? It has been 35 years. Given how rapidly investment decisions are made and economic transformations take place (35 years ago almost nobody had heard of deindustrialization or Silicon Valley), that is certainly more than enough time for us to have seen an impact of this declining stock of social capital. Can any evidence of a relative economic decline of the United States be found? Can people convincingly argue that the past 20 years have been poor ones for the

American economy overall? Ultimately, if Putnam is right about the decline in social capital, then he is wrong about the role of social capital in economic development.

But moving from American society in general to community development in particular, Putnam's second assertion is as follows:

> Although most poor Americans do not reside in the inner city, there is something qualitatively different about the social and economic isolation experienced by the chronically poor blacks and Latinos who do. Joblessness, inadequate education, and poor health clearly truncate the opportunities of ghetto residents. Yet so do profound deficiencies in social capital. (1993b, 39)

But do inner cities lack social capital in the sense that Putnam means? The answer to this question is somewhat mixed and is not as easily answered as is often assumed. There seems to be a perception in American policy circles and white popular culture that inner-city, nonwhite neighborhoods are bereft of values, norms, morals, trust, and relationships. This perception is usually justified with a passing reference to the work of Wilson (1987), but it is a very particular segment of his work that is being referenced and a very narrow reading of him and his much more substantial project. This has been as true in the debate about social capital as in many other debates about public policy, despite the fact that there is only limited justification for this view. As Portney and Berry put it:

> The debate about social capital and civic engagement largely concentrates on White, middle-class America. Virtually none of the debate and, as far as we can find, no empirical analysis considers whether poor people, people of minority racial or ethnic status, and people in inner cities have also experienced the trends in civic engagement. (1997, 633)

When it comes to trust-based relations, ethnographic research (Anderson 1999; Stack 1974; Sullivan 1997; Wood 1997) strongly suggests that these are present in inner cities. Anderson describes some of these trust-based relations in his most recent book and terms them "the irregular economy." He observes:

> The irregular economy may be characterized as a barter system, which works by an exchange of favors. For example, an individual will repair a neighbor's car on the weekend, or help paint someone's steps, or perform a plumbing job, or style someone's hair, but take no money for it; rather, the person will wait to be paid back with a favor in the future. (Anderson 1999, 318)

It is interesting to note that for Anderson, these trust-based "irregular economy" activities exist because of the failure of the people and the community to function properly economically. It is unclear, at best, whether such informal trust-based bartering would coexist with economic development or that comparable relationships exist in already wealthy communities. In this sense, there is even the possibility that economic growth and development might promote the destruction of trust-based noncommodified relationships, as the communities become more immersed in the commodity relations central to the capitalist economy. But Anderson's (1999) ethnographic observations are not isolated, and in making this point more generally, Portes states, "Sociologists know that everyday survival in poor urban communities frequently depends on close interactions with kin and friends in similar situations. The problem is that such ties seldom reach beyond the inner city" (1998, 13–14). The problem in inner cities, therefore, is not that there is a lack of trust-based social networks and mutual support, but rather that these networks and support are unable to generate capital. At the same time, however, aggregate data suggest that residents in inner-city areas do tend to lack trust in either society at large or in people they do not know (Putnam does a good job of compiling these data [2000]). But these aggregate data do not contradict the ethnographic data indicating that trust in already existing social networks is present in inner cities.

Regarding the existence of community-level organizations, inner-city areas contain large numbers of these as well. Specifically with regard to community development, the number of community development corporations (CDCs) in American inner cities has actually exploded in the past 30 years, beginning, ironically, shortly after the time when Putnam marks the start of the decline of civic engagement. While the number of CDCs in the late 1960s and early 1970s (most created by the Office of Economic Opportunity) was measured in the dozens, by 1999 there were over 3,600 of them nationwide (National Congress for Community Economic Development 1999). Although it can be argued that many of these CDCs were not the product of grassroots action at the community level and were instead created from without, this does not diminish their existence as nongovernment, not-for-profit organizations located within low-income communities. The more important problem is that the ability of most of these community-based organizations to generate long-term economic growth for their communities has been rather limited (Lenz 1988; Stoecker 1997). And while the reasons are complex and require a much more thorough discussion than is possible here, it is also clear from this experience that simply creating community-based organizations in inner-city neighborhoods does not, by itself, generate economic prosperity or even economic security for the residents.

In perhaps the most comprehensive quantitative effort to measure the impact of Putnam's social capital on the long-term stability of urban neighborhoods, Temkin and Rohe (1998) found that "the extent to which neighborhood residents volunteer in neighborhood organizations or other groups did not have a significant effect on neighborhood stability" (85). This is a striking conclusion, but it does not prevent them from observing that "neighborhoods with higher levels of social capital…are more likely to remain stable over time" (Temkin and Rohe 1998, 84). But if one reads closely, it becomes clear that the dependent variables and independent variables are measuring the same thing, so it is no wonder that Temkin and Rohe have found a statistical correlation. They state, "Both loyalty and attachment to neighborhood are higher in neighborhoods that remain stable over time. Similarly, neighborhoods where a higher proportion of residents believe they live in a good place tend to remain stable" (Temkin and Rohe 1998, 84). This is a fair conclusion, but it seems to say very little.

Even more striking is that the demonstration project for LISC's non-confrontational consensus organizing in the Monangahela Valley in Pittsburgh was viewed a success by LISC and by Gittell and Vidal (1998) because within 10 years it had (1) created 17 new CDCs, (2) sustained resident volunteer commitment, and (3) garnered increased support from the metropolitan area's larger community. Gittell and Vidal then state, "These commitments are particularly impressive given the limited physical and economic improvement in the valley to date" (1998, 3–4). But if there has been little economic improvement over the course of a decade, then why is the demonstration considered a success that LISC and other foundations should replicate? Surely social capital is meant to be a means to the end of economic security and development, not an end in and of itself.

Inner cities, therefore, do lack social capital, but not the social capital that Putnam is talking about—which does exist, albeit rather unevenly—but social capital as Bourdieu (1985) and Loury (1977) used the term. Part of the problem is that because of Coleman's (1988) definition, we have confused the level of social networks with their ability to generate capital. We therefore render invisible social networks unable to generate capital. But the question remains, How can we rectify the currently inequitable distribution of social capital (in Bourdieu's [1985] and Loury's [1977] sense) in American society? In attempting to answer this question, I will now turn to the policy implications of the discussion thus far.

Toward a new understanding of social capital and community development

Social capital must be reconnected to economic capital for the term to have any meaning. Otherwise, we are not talking about *capital* at all. Loury's original use of the concept (1977) was part of his effort to demonstrate that the idea of equal opportunity was an impossibility. He was right. When his definition is combined with Bourdieu's (1985) understanding of capital as essentially about power, we can begin to approach policy and organizing efforts designed to rectify, or at least, mitigate, the inequities in access to this form of capital. We need to create social networks that allow individuals to realize capital, while simultaneously allowing these networks to realize the power needed to attract and control that capital (for the benefit of those in the networks). That is, while we need to create social networks to allow individuals to realize capital, those networks must ensure that the groups of people involved retain some control over the capital. Only in doing this can individual gains and interests be assumed to be synonymous with group gains and interests. Fortunately, such networks, and the organizations that are their focal points, already exist within the community development movement and need not be created from scratch. They are, however, rather limited in number and are small, often peripheral components of the much broader and more diverse movement. The utility of social capital is that it provides a framework for supporting and prioritizing these efforts over other parts of the community development field.

Community land trusts (CLTs) are a particularly useful way to use a community organization both to have the power to control investment capital and to allow individuals to realize capital (in the form of home equity) (Davis 1991; Krinsky and Hovde 1996; Soifer 1990). In a CLT, the community group owns and controls the land in trust, and all land use decisions are made by the organization. Residents in a CLT own their own housing units (unless they are in a mutual housing association [MHA] or cooperative, which is not normally the case) and therefore obtain the equity they build up in their units through their investments and improvements. If residents choose to leave, the land trust has the right of first refusal, and the resale of their unit is limited, so that it remains affordable (to the benefit of the community), but the individual is able to realize his or her own investments (to the individual's benefit).

In an MHA, the association owns the land and the units, but individual residents are able to realize some equity because of the interest gained on the initial deposit required for residency (which is usually between $1,000 and $2,500 and is often borrowed from the association and paid back slowly over time) (Krinsky and Hovde 1996; Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation 1995; Peterman and Young 1991). Residents in an MHA are also much more interconnected than residents in a CLT, most CDCs, or public housing because of the substantial number of involuntary social interactions that come from the work and governance components of residency. MHAs are also a bit more mixed income than many other kinds of affordable housing, and thus the networks through which employment might be found (for instance) cut across class lines. Similarly, in a limited-equity housing cooperative, residents buy shares and are thus able to accumulate equity. At the same time, however, the cooperative has the right of first refusal when a resident chooses to move, and the resale price is strictly limited, so as to maintain the units' affordability for the community as a whole (Leavitt and Saegert 1990; Stone 1993).

Beyond the realm of housing, microenterprise lending circles are an excellent example of how organizations can act as focal points for social networks to come together and have the power to make lending decisions, and to allow individual members to realize capital from those networks (McLenighan and Pogge 1991; Servon 1999). In a microenterprise lending program, borrowers tend to operate in borrowing circles that replace the more mainstream evaluations of creditworthiness with both peer pressure and character-based lending. Loan decisions are made by members of the borrowing circles, and the loans are used by individual members to create and expand forms of self-employment and microbusinesses. Individuals are thus able to realize capital through social networks, but the power to control capital is realized by the networks themselves.

Finally, in community development credit unions (CDCUs), individuals are able to use their membership to gain access to capital they would likely otherwise not be able to get (DeFilippis 2000; Tholin and Pogge 1991; Williams 1997), while enabling the CDCU, and often its sponsoring organization, to have more control and power over the flow of investment capital into the community. In the context of social capital, however, CDCUs do have a drawback in that the level of social interaction between members, and therefore the social networking that exists between them, is somewhat limited. This is particularly true for the larger, often more established CDCUs. Thus the CDCU, as the focal point for the social networks, often subsumes those networks, and interactions are between individual members and the CDCU.

Conclusion: Social capital, power, and the implications for policy and organizing

Despite the provocative title of this article, I am not arguing here that social capital does not matter in community development. Rather, I argue that with the privileging of Putnam's interpretations of social capital, the term has lost its potential utility for the community development movement. In Putnam's understanding of the term, social capital becomes divorced from capital (in the literal, economic sense), stripped of power relations, and imbued with the assumption that social networks are win-win relationships and that individual gains, interests, and profits are synonymous with group gains, interests, and profits.

Putnam's framework is fundamentally economically flawed—which is not surprising given that he separates social capital from economic capital—and it enjoys limited support from either theories of political economy or the empirical realities of the United States. Also, Putnam's understanding, with its lack of power and conflict, has led to a misguided embrace of Eichler's consensus organizing and nonconfrontational organizing (Gittell and Vidal 1998). But this begs the following question: Why would those who benefit from the current structures that produce and distribute social capital willingly turn over their privileged access to it? We would not expect rich people to willingly turn over their mutual fund portfolios or, less hypothetically, embrace poor and nonwhite students in their schools without a confrontation. Why should we expect that this form of capital would somehow be different from the others? People who realize capital through their networks of social capital do so precisely because others are excluded.

Rather than assuming that social networks and relationships are win-win endeavors and that low-income people and areas are socially disconnected, we need to construct social networks that are truly win-win relationships for people in low-income areas, while building on already existing social networks and relationships. And we need to do so in ways that allow those networks to realize greater control and power over the flows of capital that play such an important role in shaping and producing American cities. Inner-city neighborhoods have social networks and trust between members of those networks, and they possess many nongovernment, community-based organizations. What they lack is power and the capital that partially constitutes that power. They are not likely to realize either without confrontation or within a Putnam-inspired framework of community development.

Author

James DeFilippis is Lecturer in the Department of Geography at King's College, London.

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