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What is This?
Introduction: Civicness, Equality, and Democracy—A “Dark Side” of Social Capital?

Jan W. van Deth¹ and Sonja Zmerli²

Abstract

Debates about social capital usually focus on its presumed positive consequences. Although this expectation has been corroborated empirically, in many instances some less benign consequences of social capital have also been uncovered. Several explanations for the emergence and consequences of these “dark sides” of social capital are briefly presented here and, subsequently, put to empirical testing. The contributors to this issue of American Behavioral Scientist have a common understanding of these dark sides of social capital. Conceptualizing them as negative consequences or outcomes, the authors use various research strategies to scrutinize the nature of the effects of social capital in various situations. In each analysis, however, particular focus is placed on the importance of the contextual setting. Special attention is paid to the degree of democratization, the postcommunist legacy, different welfare state regimes, the saliency of political cleavages, and types and interconnectedness of voluntary associations. The findings suggest that the specific consequences of social capital largely depend on political and social conditions.

Keywords

social capital, voluntary associations, democracy

In the middle of an ocean of discussions on the presumed positive consequences of social capital, less benign aspects are frequently overlooked. However, several authors have previously dealt explicitly with the “dark sides” or “unsocial” and “bad” forms of social capital and pointed out possible negative, noxious, harmful, or nasty aspects. These negative characteristics should not be treated as an aberration but, rather, as intrinsic features of civil society: “All known forms of civil society are plagued by

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endogenous sources of incivility” (Keane, 1998, p. 135; italics in original). Accordingly, the degree of civility of civil societies—reflected by the recognition of solidarity, freedom, equality, and tolerance—can vary. Admitting the existence of dark sides of social capital and searching for their origins and consequences could, therefore, lead to a better understanding of why civil societies might be a blessing or a curse. However, clear-cut definitions of negative social capital are still as much missing as convincing empirical evidence of its consequences for democratic societies.

The contributions to this special issue all deal with possible negative consequences of social capital in different situations and are based on a common understanding of what constitutes negative consequences of social capital in operational terms. Because social capital is usually expected to have positive outcomes (more participation, more social cohesion, more equality, better democratic performance, higher economic growth, etc.), the correlations between social capital and each of these consequences, generally speaking, should be positive. Reversing this argument, the detection of negative correlations between social capital and any of these phenomena can be considered as unambiguous indicators of a dark side or of bad social capital. Instead of debating the specific nature or characteristics of social capital as being crucial for its depiction as “good” or “bad,” we shift the attention toward the specific impact social capital might exert. If more social capital leads to a reduction of something positively valued (e.g., social equality or tolerance) or to an increase of something negatively valued (e.g., corruption or free-riding), then these revealed relationships are perceived as negative consequences of social capital. In this way, an unambiguous conceptualization of a dark side or of bad social capital is obtained. The contributors to this issue of American Behavioral Scientist all show the usefulness of this approach by applying it to very different realms.

Explaining Dark Sides of Social Capital

Social capital can be defined in many ways. Following the conventional approach by Coleman, the core of the concept lies in the reduction of transaction costs for collective action in social networks based on trust and reciprocity (cf. Coleman, 1990). The proponents of social capital are anything but modest in their claims of the benign effects of social capital: “Social capital makes us smarter, healthier, safer, richer, and better able to govern a just and stable democracy” (Putnam, 2000, p. 290). Even if only one of these claims were true, social capital would be extremely worthwhile for the future of democratic societies.

Social capital does not have only positive consequences, and a number of studies have pointed out the “dark sides of social capital,” “unsocial capital,” or “bad social capital” (cf. Callahan, 2005; Dekker, 2004; Fiorina, 1999; Hoeber Rudolph, 2004; Levi, 1996; Portes & Landolt, 1996; Putnam, 2000). A theoretically inspired means to differentiate between different forms of social capital and its benevolent or negative outcome (or outcomes) is offered by the concepts of bonding social capital and bridging social capital. In general, both forms are considered to be vital but are composed
of different components. Whereas bridging social capital results from heterogeneous social networks, social trust, and generalized norms of reciprocity, bonding social capital is assumed to be the outcome of homogeneous social networks, particularized trust, and specific norms of reciprocity (Putnam, 2000, pp. 19-21.). Heterogeneous social networks offer their members the opportunities to socialize regularly with people from different social backgrounds, which results in successful cooperation, trustful relationships, and reducing stereotypes. As a consequence, the capacity to overcome the dilemma of collective action largely depends on the existence of bridging social capital. Homogeneous networks, on the other hand, inhibit these processes because social cleavages are not overcome but are reinforced. Therefore, homogeneous networks function as a “sociological superglue” (Putnam, 2000, p. 23), providing important social and psychological support at the expense of developing broader identities and an interest in the common good. As a result, bonding social capital often comes with negative externalities or even illiberal effects (Putnam, 2000, pp. 23, 358; Putnam & Goss, 2002, pp. 11-12). In a nutshell, “Bonding social capital is . . . good for ‘getting by,’ but bridging social capital is crucial for ‘getting ahead’” (Putnam, 2000, p. 23). Despite the fruitful theoretical advancement that the concepts of bridging and bonding social capital have brought about in scientific debate, their explanatory power lacks empirical backing (Quaile Hill & Matsubayashi, 2005; Teorell, 2003).

Instead of referring to the heterogeneity or homogeneity of social networks in order to explain the contrasting consequences of social capital, another approach takes the impact of associational constitutive goods into account (Warren, 2001). Associations that strive for collective goods instill in their members norms and values that also generalize beyond associational boundaries and therefore produce inclusive social capital, which brings about positive effects. Organizations, however, that pursue individual goods tend to foster group boundaries and self-interest, leading to the emergence of exclusive social capital that can be to the detriment of society as a whole (Zmerli, 2008).

Concepts such as bonding and bridging social capital (or inclusive and exclusive social capital) offer various opportunities to describe the ways in which social capital might affect society and democracy. Yet, as such, these concepts do not offer entirely conclusive explanations for the likelihood of less benign consequences. In light of the diversity of the dark sides of social capital and the continuing search for theoretical and empirical explanations, these less benign consequences of social capital can be attributed to various factors. Three main approaches are briefly presented here.

A first interpretation follows directly from the fact that norms and values are intrinsic (cultural) aspects of social capital. If these norms and values have negative effects on the system or the regime, then the spread of negative orientations, by definition, increases as these norms and values become more significant. Closely related to this argument is the line of reasoning used by Tocquevillean proponents of social capital: Exactly because involvement enhances social capital (social skills, contacts, personalized trust), this mechanism applies to the benefit of any organization or social network, regardless of its criminal or nondemocratic character. Commonly mentioned specimens in this regard are religious organizations that show clear sectarian tendencies,
status groups that aim primarily at social exclusion, the Mafia, skinheads, the Ku Klux Klan, or the Nation of Islam (cf. Levi, 1996), who all achieve their goals more efficiently by relying on networks, trust, and shared values, even though these are of the bonding kind.

A focus on small-scale organizations allows a second interpretation of the negative consequences of social capital. Small-scale organizations tend to create bonding social capital, and their closure may inhibit any permeation of external inputs. The “ascribed trust” (Zucker, 1986) present in such segmented networks weakens the capacity of these structures (or their members) to engage in (formal and informal) associations that create the environment indispensable for developing process-based trust. For local communities with a multitude of small-scale organizations, this implies that the production of collective goods is hindered (Crouch, Le Galès, Trigilia, & Voelzkow, 2001, 2004; McMillan & Woodruff, 1999; Pérez-Díaz, 2000). If social cohesion depends on the ability of interest groups to participate in collective decisions and to negotiate solutions based on the consent of the parties involved, too strong bonding social capital will impede social cohesion. This issue seems to be of particular interest with regard to the problems of trust and social capital in postcommunist and transition societies (e.g., Letki & Evans, 2005).

A related—third—argument stresses that the dark sides of social capital are most likely observed in inward-looking and isolated social networks (Li, Savage, & Pickles, 2003; Paxton, 2002). Three mechanisms of integration of local clusters of more or less formalized social networks into the national polity are of specific relevance here: institutional structures or governance mechanisms, bridging ties provided by overlapping memberships, and strong collective identities that can exist independently of social networks. The creation of “uncivickness” and intolerance is more likely when bridging mechanisms are missing.

These interpretations show that the negative consequences of social capital cannot be excluded. Instead, we arrive at the expectation that a higher level of social capital may not only have benevolent consequences but may also come with discontent, disaffection, intolerance, the persistence of social inequality, biased representation, and economic obstacles leading to the deterioration of democratic legitimacy (van Deth, 2006). These interpretations are used as the starting point for empirical studies of the presumed negative consequences of social capital. Instead of speculating theoretically, the contributors to this issue of ABS attempt to assess the empirical plausibility of those arguments that focus on the less benevolent aspects of social capital in various situations.

**Specimens of Dark Sides of Social Capital**

The contributions to this issue of ABS investigate the negative consequences of social capital in different ways and in different contexts. Broadly speaking, three approaches can be distinguished. In the first two articles, micromechanisms are emphasized by studying the impact of various aspects of social capital on political orientations among
the citizens of European democracies. Next, a set of four articles stresses the need to take contextual effects explicitly into account in order to trace the less benign consequences of social capital. Finally, a detailed case study of the effects of a predominance of bonding social capital in local economies is presented.

The Tocquevillean idea of the benign consequences of membership in voluntary associations clearly underlies the first two contributions to this volume. The impact of structural aspects of social capital is tested by Jan van Deth in his comparison of attitudes among members and nonmembers of voluntary associations in a large number of European democracies. The benevolent consequences of social capital appear to be clearly related to membership of voluntary associations: Irrespective of the type of association considered, members of voluntary associations show higher levels of satisfaction with democracy and higher levels of political engagement than do nonmembers. “Bad” forms of social capital are not widely spread among voluntary associations, but potentially any type of association can be depicted as entailing a bad form of social capital. In particular, religious organizations frequently appear as an example of bad social capital because their members tend to be less concerned about politics. Thus, the good news implied in these results is that bad forms of social capital are not widely found among voluntary associations in Europe. Generally speaking, membership in any type of organization is accompanied by positive political orientations. At the same time, however, the not-so-good news is that any type of association can potentially also be depicted as a bad form of social capital if we look at the countries separately. Especially religious organizations frequently appear as specimens of these bad forms. Because this last conclusion is related to political saliency in particular, there are only a few “dark shades” in the mainly sunny world of voluntary associations in Europe.

In the second contribution, Sonja Zmerli also focuses on microlevel mechanisms from a comparative perspective and scrutinizes possible negative relationships between social capital and norms of citizenship. The search for negative relationships between social capital and norms of citizenship reveals that, in particular, norms of social order are reduced rather than strengthened by social capital. Assuming, for instance, that law-abidingness is a precondition for the stability of democratic societies, the detection of negative relationships between law-abidingness and social trust has severe implications. Contrary to theoretical claims, having trust in one’s fellow citizens’ lawful behavior is no reliable predictor of one’s own willingness to follow the rules.

Even the most arduous proponent of the Tocquevillean gospel of associational engagement does not believe that societal conditions are irrelevant for the actual consequences of social capital. On the contrary, many authors suggest that societal conditions determine the impact of social capital to a high degree. Therefore, taking conditions and contexts explicitly into account might be a key factor in deciding whether social capital has positive or negative consequences. Four contributions to this issue are explicitly based on this idea. In the first one, Filippo Barbera and Roberto Albano search for negative consequences of social capital in order to investigate ways in which to enhance political legitimacy in various countries. At the core of their analyses is the willingness of citizens to help each other. Available welfare provisions, however, are suspected to
reduce this willingness (the “crowding-out” effect). This hypothesis is tested by selecting four countries, each one a specimen of a different welfare regime. Helping behavior is interpreted as a “credit slip,” and its effect on the confidence in, and satisfaction with, democracy in different welfare regimes is determined. The empirical findings clearly support the crowding-in explanation: Informal help and welfare-state provisions are positively interrelated. However, the empirical results are also consistent with the idea that an accumulation of credit slips in different institutional contexts has quite different consequences for the legitimacy of the system as a whole. People who spend their time helping others in a weak welfare state also have a critical attitude toward the political system. By contrast, in stronger welfare states, people who spend time helping others do not express this critical attitude. The relationship between informal and institutional types of social capital, then, is best understood in terms of institutionally mediated complementarity with different (negative) consequences in different contexts.

The second analysis of the relevance of contextual factors for the consequences of social capital is presented by Gema García Albacete in her comparative research of various Spanish regions. The starting point of her work is the idea that the consequences of social capital for political attitudes depend on the polarization of political conflicts. The saliency of a political cleavage is expected to have an impact on three aspects of social capital: its structure, its outcomes in terms of democratic inequality, and its effects on citizens’ attitudes toward democracy. The comparison of different regions within the same country corroborates these assumptions. In politically polarized contexts there is lower democratic equality in terms of the representation of identities. In highly polarized regions such as the Basque Country there is more bonding than bridging social capital, and therefore the positive effects of inclusive social capital for democracy are lower. Likewise, citizens of politically polarized regions who are engaged in informal social networks with a specific identity are less satisfied with democracy and feel less capable to affect the political sphere than citizens who are not involved in these social networks.

Third, Hajdeja Iglić studies negative consequences of the structural aspects of social capital. Her comparative analysis of social and political tolerance in different European countries clearly reveals that the impact of associational involvement is both ambiguous and contextual. In the case of social tolerance, there is a difference between old and new democracies. With regard to political tolerance, however, the effects of associational involvement vary. In countries with fragile democratic institutions or where political extremists present a political threat due to their strength and publicity, associational involvement matters. This is not the case in countries where these actions have not yet raised wider public concerns. The ambiguity arises because the effects of associational involvement can be both positive and negative. Close social ties that are formed in the context of voluntary associations are, in general, helpful in developing the social tolerance of various stigmatized groups and ethnic minorities. Yet, associational involvement also has negative consequences for tolerance. The extensiveness of associational involvement is negatively related to political tolerance in situations where the political stakes are very high. In addition, there is a clear difference between old and newer democracies with respect to the impact of the strength of ties on social tolerance.
Although the positive effect of close ties can be noticed consistently across the old democracies, it is missing in newer democracies, including Spain. This phenomenon is mainly attributed to the low interconnectedness of associations, a persisting characteristic of postcommunist civil societies.

Fourth, Sigrid Roßteutscher conducts macrolevel comparisons explicating the negative consequences of social capital. In her analyses, she questions the general conclusions about the benevolent consequences of social capital, especially for non-democratic settings and for defect or transitory democracies. She shows that the enthusiastic embrace of the idea of social capital by nongovernmental organizations, intergovernmental confederations, and supranational institutions is not supported by empirical evidence. This sheds a skeptical light on social capital’s democratic impact. Her main findings suggest that social capital can also function as a stabilizer of authoritarian rule. Social trust, in particular, appears to throw a spanner in the works of democratization. Trust increases the stability of nondemocratic leadership by generating popular support, by suppressing regime-threatening forms of protest activity, and by nourishing undemocratic ideals concerning governance. What is more, involvement in voluntary associations also increases confidence in governments of nondemocratic regimes and undermines protest action but—in contrast to trust—strengthens the belief in democracy as the best form of governance.

The final contribution to this ABS issue takes a different methodological approach by selecting a case study strategy. Monika Ewa Kaminska investigates the impact of the bonding social capital present in a local production system in the Polish region of Łódź. Her findings reveal two effects. Even though the “rise and demise” of this local economy cannot solely be ascribed to the quality of social capital, bonding social capital brought about two positive results: rapid post-1989 economic growth of local companies and a neutralization of the effects of the post-1989 economic crisis. Subsequently, however, it has severely hampered cooperative behavior, impeded learning and unlearning, and finally contributed to the incapacity of the local production system to adapt to new market economy conditions. In addition, bonding social capital originating from the communist period has been reproduced through local economic governance mechanisms that are heavily influenced by the shadow economy. These results can also be summarized in a less positive way. Apparently, the lack of bridging social capital inhibited the reconstruction of a once successful economic region.

**Dark Sides of Social Capital?**

Without a doubt, the introduction of the concept of social capital has been important, but it is equally important to account for both its positive and negative consequences. Concise theoretical explanations for the origins of these benign and less benign effects are still missing. Yet, the research findings presented here unambiguously show that context matters. In this regard, our findings corroborate the theoretical assumptions outlined in the second section. Membership in voluntary organizations and trust are usually accompanied by positive political orientations. Yet any type of association can potentially also be depicted as a bad form of social capital. In addition, inward-looking and loosely connected
associations, characteristic of bonding social capital, can promote negative consequences such as social intolerance and low economic performance. The empirical results also stress the importance of both institutional arrangements and the social structure in order to understand the potential of social capital to produce either positive or negative outcomes. Polarized societies tend to bond along crucial sociopolitical cleavages, thereby creating social capital that potentially undermines the legitimacy of democratic systems. Likewise, even differences in welfare state arrangements can account for the emergence of divergent forms of social capital, which may result in system support or distrust and disaffection. On the other hand, to the extent that social capital functions as an important system stabilizer, it does not offer exclusive guarantees to stabilize democratic systems. In this respect, social capital clearly works irrespective of the institutional context. Apart from the relevance of the contextual embeddedness of social capital, the findings also raise doubts about the likelihood of some of its widely assumed benign consequences. The potentially less benign consequences of associational membership have already been mentioned. In addition, it has become clear that norms of social order—preconditions of democratic system stability—and social capital show tendencies to cancel each other out.

In sum, theorizing about social capital and its consequences calls, first and foremost, for a thorough analysis of the contextual setting—be it at the micro-, meso-, or macro-level. As usual, these requirements can only be met at the expense of parsimonious and generalizable assumptions.

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References

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