Ideas / Idées

Social Capital

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Social capital has been credited with the ability to cure most social ills in the contemporary world. According to many analysts, such as Portes (1998) and Putnam (2000), it helps people resolve collective problems more easily, facilitates development, heightens awareness of our globally connected fates, fosters the flow of useful information and helps people cope with trauma and improve their health, find jobs and maintain businesses. Public health, crime, alienation, vandalism, poverty, civic irresponsibility, underdevelopment: all can allegedly be resolved or alleviated through the appropriate mobilization or inculcation of social capital. As a consequence, the idea of "social capital" has been very successful in attracting the attention of researchers and policy makers alike. In anthropology, social capital has important roots in anthropological research on social networks and reciprocity (Hannerz 1980; Harriss 2001:3-5). But now research in and public attention paid to this area is largely dominated by other social scientists, particularly political scientists and sociologists. So for example, of the 2,277 articles on social capital in the Social Sciences Citation Index, 414 were in sociology, 235 in public, occupational and environmental health, 226 in economics, 199 in planning and development, 166 in political science, 72 in geography, 106 in urban studies and only 30 in anthropology. Anthropologists are barely visible in the literature beyond the provision of useful examples, and where they have been engaged, it has generally involved the application of the ideas of Putnam, Coleman or Bourdieu rather than through having a significant impact on interdisciplinary or policy discussions.[1]

The question I would like explore here is why the concept is so widely used and applied in the social sciences and also beyond them? Is it a powerful solution to a diverse set of practical and theoretical problems or for the social sciences or rather a chaotic concept that has been successful precisely because of its ambiguities and malleability? Does this indeterminacy make it applicable to analyses and policy recommendations on almost anything but without providing solid practical and theoretical purchase?

The vast, and accelerating, quantity of publications utilizing social capital ideas in recent years makes it impossible to provide an adequate review in the short space of this essay to thoroughly address these questions (see Figure 1). Instead, I offer comments on three issues which may shed some light on certain aspects of these questions. First, I will comment on the nature of social capital, particularly the confusions created by its treatment as both an individual-level and community-level concept. The distinction between positive and negative social capital will also be addressed here. Second, I will briefly discuss the causes and consequences of its increasing popularity as a source for policy and intervention strategies by powerful agents such as the World Bank and national governments. At the same time that social capital is widely seen as a solution for myriad social and developmental problems, corruption has received similar attention as the source of developmental failures, yet the two phenomenon overlap in important ways. How can one be unequivocally good while the other is unremittingly bad? Finally, I consider the tendency to exclude the state from analyses of social capital. The extent of social networks in a community is frequently measured to see if it accounts for epidemiological or criminological differences, but interactions and ties between members of the public and government officials are generally neglected. To illustrate how bringing the state back in (again!) can offer different insights into the dynamics of social capital, I provide an example from my current research on risk communication about bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE or mad cow disease).

The Nature of Social Capital

Although the term was first used in 1916 by Lyda Hanifan, to mean loosely the positive attributes of social interaction, contemporary social capital theory generally traces its origins to Coleman, Bourdieu and Putnam.[2] Since each emphasizes a different level of analysis, conceptual confusion would seem to be inherent in the social capital perspective. Coleman, a sociologist, applied his analysis at the level of the individual and presumed the methodological individualism of rational choice theory. The level at which Bourdieu applied social capital analysis was less clear, oscillating between seeing the forms of capital as resources utilized by individually situated and strategic agents and as the properties and product of the field (*champs*) in which practices are deployed (Bourdieu 1986; Smart 1993). It was Putnam, however, who won "masses of converts, convincing them that in social capital they have a concept that will help them to solve many problems and change the world" (Harriss 2001:5).

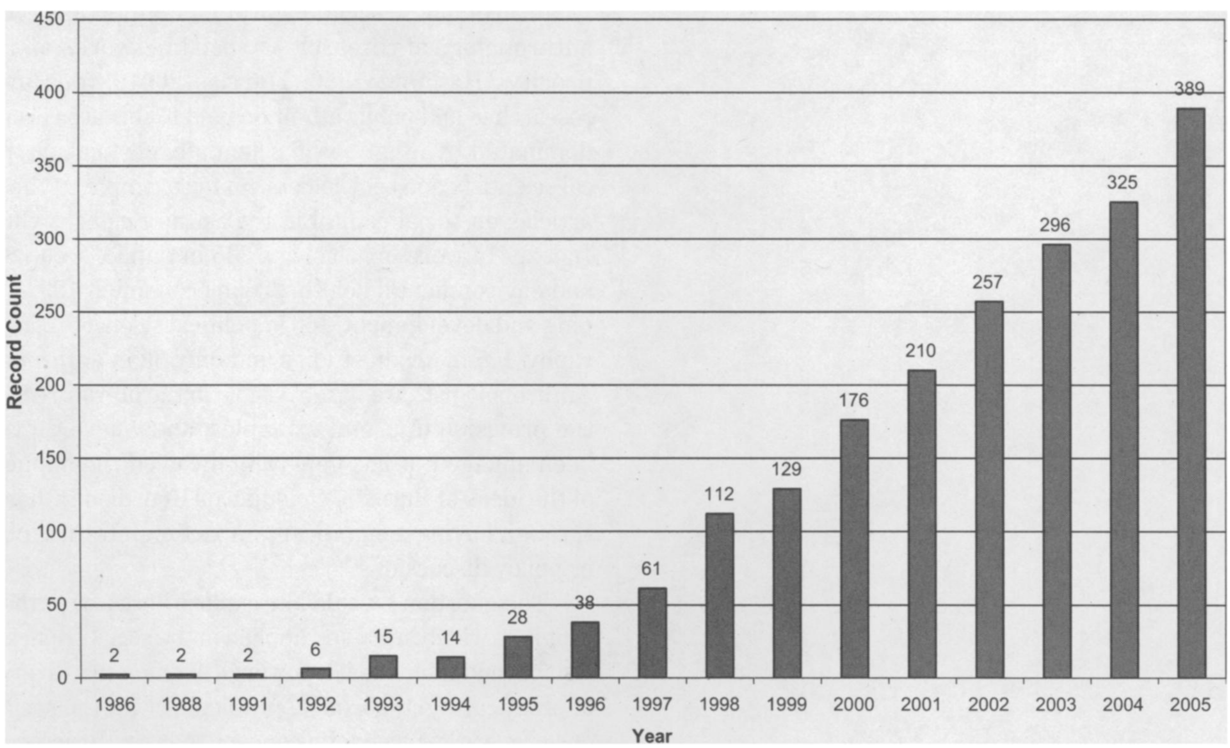

Figure 1: Number of Articles on Social Capital in Social Sciences Citation Index

For Putnam, social capital is predominantly a characteristic of "societies" or "communities." This approach makes social capital theory of particular interest to policy makers, since it is in the subdivided spaces of authority that policy is concretely implemented. The complexity of Bourdieu's theory of practice is only with difficulty translated into policy recommendations. Bourdieu's approach was "excessively" concerned with both content and context, inconveniently so for a policy idea intended to be generally applicable. Ben Fine has suggested that "social capital can only reign supreme by excising the cultural, the symbolic—and Bourdieu" (Harriss 2006:193).

Putnam encourages conceptual confusion when he also emphasizes the ways in which individuals mobilize social capital (e.g., Putnam 2000:289-290). Even if we adopt the idea that social capital is primarily a collective phenomenon, there is ambiguity between seeing it entailed in characteristics that can only be measured at the community level, such as effectiveness of government or level of crime, versus those that are aggregates of individual data, such as the percentage of population trusting their government or their neighbours or participating in voluntary associations (Pearce and Smith 2003:125). These confusions around the ontological status of social capital make it a "chaotic concept" (Fine 1999:8; Sayer 1992), but they also help to make it popular.

There is nothing inherently wrong with concepts that bridge different levels of analysis, as long as this extension is recognized and evidence that applies at one level is not taken to confirm ideas at another level. Unfortunately, this seems to occur frequently in the social capital literature, resulting in circular arguments so that high levels of social capital in a community (such as localities in northern Italy) encourage civic engagement among individuals, which produces high levels of social capital in the community (with the reverse occurring in communities that "fail to develop" such as southern Italy). As Harriss (2001:8) points out, this risks confusing symptom with cause. The other main difficulty with social capital as a collective attribute is the classic problem of defining the "community." Is it a nation? A state or province? A locality? Are all those residing (or otherwise present) in the selected entity "members" of that collectivity? What about guest workers or others denied the rights of full citizenship and participation? Should their participation in their home places be counted as part of involvement in voluntary associations for the place in which they are residing? The processes of transnationalism or translocality are important challenges to any collective-level definition of social capital (Smart and Smart 1998).

Even Putnam (2000) recognizes that high levels of trust and solidarity can produce problems when they are not optimally located, as among mafia members. This awkwardness encourages elaborations on the basic concept of social capital. One is the distinction between bonding capital (ties between members of a group), bridging capital (links between different groups), and linking capital (ties between society and governmental actors and institutions). Good outcomes require an appropriate balance between the three types of ties, since excessive bonding capital can inhibit development by encouraging parochialism and social exclusion, while insufficient bonding capital can result in opportunistic individualism with negative effects for the community cooperation that social capital is thought to facilitate. As an illustration, anthropology's lack of apparent impact on social capital theory may be because of an excess of bonding capital, represented by how we publish, and insufficient bridging capital to the other social sciences, or linking capital to those who formulate policy.

Another typological elaboration that helps maintain the assumption of the positive nature of social capital is the distinction between positive and negative social capital. The term "negative social capital" is usually attributed to Alejandro Portes, but was used by him as shorthand to demonstrate that social capital can have negative social effects. Scholars who have subsequently used the idea of negative social capital have less justifiably discussed it as a distinct type of social capital. For example, in a discussion of addiction treatment, Cheung and Cheung (2003:148) distinguish between negative social capital that "facilitates the person's engagement in deviant behaviour" and positive social capital that is "generated by the embeddedness in conventional pro-social networks." This approach is both dubious, since the labels depend on what the analyst (or legal system) considers good behaviour, and lacking in parsimony. We are better off recognizing that social capital is a resource that can be put to unlimited kinds of uses, only some of which we will approve of. Rather than being either good or bad by its own nature, the effects of social capital, like economic capital, depend on what it is used for and this is influenced by the broader social and cultural context. This question will be addressed further in comparing social capital and corruption in the next section.

Where there is a need for subdividing "social capital" is in breaking down the diverse kinds of entities collapsed into the category. Bourdieu's approach has the advantage of distinguishing between obligations between individuals (social capital), broader civic obligations or one's reputation for trustworthiness (symbolic capital), and knowledge of how networks can be used (cultural capital). A more differentiated approach to non-economic capital is less prone to confusions and questionable causal inferences.

Social Capital and Corruption

There is a kind of schizophrenia current in public policy studies, where considerable attention is being paid to both social capital and corruption, with the former hailed as the solution to myriad developmental problems and the latter the cause of just as many developmental dysfunctions (Bukovansky 2006). The overlap between the two concepts, one seen as an almost unmitigated public good and the other a completely unmitigated public "bad," is, for the most part, conveniently neglected.

The conflict is often managed by designation. Just as economists can predetermine the outcomes of rent-seeking and lobbying as wasteful and inefficient by defining it as "directly unproductive activity" and thereby avoid the work of examining the concrete empirical outcomes, the positive effects of social capital are often worked into its very definition. Combining this with a normative definition of corruption, assuming its negative impacts then effectively diverts our attention from the inevitable overlap between any two concepts that centre on informality, connections and insider status. Corruption becomes even more excluded from conventional notions of social capital than is "negative social capital," and social capital is often seen as being the solution for the problems of corruption. Understanding the results of this use of conceptual blinkers requires a brief excursion through ideas on the use of social capital in the promotion of development.

Woolcock (1998) argues that the possibility of having too much of particular kinds of social capital produces developmental dilemmas. When there is too much social capital invested in integrated communities, which limits linkages outside the community, this may produce the equivalent of "amoral familism." Integration between state and society without bureaucratic integrity can result in corruption and predatory states, while coherent state organizations that lack linkages with society may produce inefficient and ineffective programs (Evans 1995). What provides the best developmental contexts, Evans suggests, are community level forms of integration that encourage and foster extra-community linkages, and state processes that generate accountable and flexible bureaucratic organizations that have non-corrupt linkages with society for the transmission of information and influence.

The crucial question, of course, is how these combinations can be accomplished. Woolcock (1998) identifies seven conditions that reduce a community's prospects for achieving sustainable and equitable economic development. At least three of these apply strongly to the People's Republic of China, which, since 1979, achieved economic growth rates among the highest ever recorded, while several other conditions apply to a certain degree. The three that most clearly fit China are: "poverty is endemic, unchecked by social safety nets, and difficult to escape through stable employment"; "uniform laws are weak, unjust, flaunted, or indiscriminately enforced"; and "polities are not freely and fairly elected or voters have few serious electoral choices" (Woolcock 1998:182). Corruption by itself does not seem to necessarily prevent rapid growth, at least when conditions serve to promote "embedded" forms of corruption based on the emic category of *guanxi*, which like social capital is best glossed as "connections" (Yan 1996; Yang 1994). The traditions of guanxi emphasize the building of relationships over short-term instrumental gain, but can easily be transformed into a poorly disguised extortion of bribes (Smart 1993, 1999).

The World Bank has wholeheartedly embraced social capital as it has attempted to move beyond the so-called "Washington Consensus" of global deregulation and market promotion (Fine 1999; Harriss 2001). Social capital was seen as a way in which market failures could be addressed without returning to a reliance on states as promoters of development (Harriss 2006). Li (2006) provides a useful analysis of the extremely ambitious social capital-based development strategy of the World Bank in Indonesia, which, between 1998 and 2003, was implemented in tens of thousands of villages, costing a billion dollars. Early difficulties did not undermine faith in the effort to promote development by mobilizing and further developing community-level social capital. Instead, recognition that "social capital, in the wrong quantities and combinations, had 'downsides' opened the terrain of social relations to ever-more refined analysis and intervention" (Li 2006:17). While corruption was seen as an ever-present problem, it was seen as distinct from community-level social capital, even if the two were in practice inevitably entangled. Rather than seeing this as a weakness of the social capital approach, it became a technical challenge that could be dealt with through sophisticated management techniques, such as local community tendering for project money. As Li (2006:9) observed, "to govern through community requires that community be rendered technical." These kind of techniques are assumed to be capable of separating out the good social capital that is intended to be promoted from the dangerous corruption that must be ended if development efforts are to succeed.

Here, at least, we move beyond the distinction by definitional fiat between social capital and corruption, but success on the ground has been limited.

My work on contested boundaries between legitimate social transactions and illegitimate bribery suggests that it is only by understanding both the content and the context of the exchanges that they can adequately be distinguished (Smart 1993, 1999). As Harriss (2001:10) points out, "linking capital" is a poor substitute for nuanced accounts of the context of power and class relations that structure the outcome of particular interventions. Generic analyses of social capital may be useful as sensitizing devices, to remind policymakers and economists of what anthropologists, historians and other social scientists have always known (although they may not have known so well how to promote), that resources inherent in social relationships may help people to achieve their goals. The question, however, is how we should bring the state back in to the discourses around social capital. Linking the community with state agents is hardly a solution in itself: that is what corruption is all about after all. It is the nature and the context of linkages that become crucial (Schneider 2006). In the next section, I will consider the process of risk communication between governments and their populations to consider the effects of trust and its loss.

Social Capital and the Politics of Mistrust

The effectiveness of communication about risks to populations by responsible authorities has been repeatedly shown to be closely related to the extent of trust that members of the population have in the government in general or the agency in particular. When communication is seen to involve "cover-up" statements about the safety of products, processes or institutions are more likely to be mistrusted. This can be seen as an erosion of social capital. Effective risk communication, on the other hand, can build trust among the citizenry, and thus social capital for the policy makers. A deficit of social capital in public health risk communication makes it very difficult to implement policies that might be of benefit for almost everyone, thus many crucial opportunities can be lost. If the credibility of "public health information, or worse, the motives behinds its use, are placed in question, this could have long ranging and deeply troubling implications for the profession of public health and all it aims to achieve" (Wynia 2006:3). Trust and credibility are hard to achieve, easy to lose, and once lost "almost impossible to regain completely" (Covello 1989:14). Identifying the conditions under which social capital between government and citizens can be most effectively fostered and those under which it can most easily be lost is an important question.

Wynia (2006) provides a recent example of compromised credibility. The U.S. Center for Disease Control seems to have gone against its own vaccination policies in instituting the post 9/11 smallpox immunization program. The decision to vaccinate half a million health professionals ran counter to advice from its own expert panel and appears to have been influenced by the Bush administration's efforts to build a case for war against Iraq. A 2003 survey of public health agencies found that 79% reported that the vaccination program had adversely affected their other bioterrorism preparedness efforts.

One of the problems raised by the breadth of Putnam's approach to social capital is that it crams too much into a single category (which of course also accounts for its generic utility). A case in point is the treatment of trust. Just as the thesis assumes that reciprocity within voluntary associations creates a norm of generalized reciprocity that encourages civic engagement, the crucial distinction between trust in specific persons and trust in institutions or the system in general is neglected (Giddens 1991; Schneider 2006). Guanxi becomes central to people's coping strategies precisely when they feel that they can trust known individuals more than they can the system and the application of the rules.

Communication about BSE in the U.K. has become a classic case of what not to do in response to a crisis (Powell and Leiss 1997). Official denials about the risk to humans, well past the point at which scientific uncertainty could reasonably justify the attitude, generated a huge increase in public skepticism, not only about government but also about scientific experts (Washer 2006). Delays in removing cattle parts from cattle feed greatly expanded the number of cases of BSE and vCJD in humans, and ultimately necessitated a massive cull of the U.K. cattle population. Both in the U.K. and elsewhere in Europe rates of beef consumption dropped significantly—almost 40% in France and 22% in Belgium (Raude et al. 2004; Verbeke et al. 1999).

By contrast, the discovery of BSE in a Canadian cow in May 2002 did not result in any significant drop in domestic consumption, although the closing of export markets devastated the export-dependent industry since there was insufficient domestic slaughter capacity. In part, this was because the Canadian government had learned from Britain's mistakes and adopted a risk communication strategy with full and frequent disclosure of information as it became available. According to a consultant who worked with Alberta Beef Producers on their communication strategies and media training, however, an additional important factor was that there were widely held public beliefs that the beef industry was made up of small, independent producers who were working hard to provide the public with a safe, high-quality product. This previously developed reputation helped protect the industry both from loss of confidence by consumers, and conditioned the media to present supportive coverage emphasizing the suffering of the producers and minimizing fears of risk to human health (Larry Clausen, Communication Inc., personal communication, August 15, 2006).

The government was less successful in protecting its social and symbolic capital in relation to Albertan beef producers. While some producers I interviewed conceded that the government did have good intentions, more commonly, politicians were criticized for playing political games around anti-Americanism while people were suffering and the substantial money spent on recovery programs was seen as poorly designed and benefitting almost exclusively the large feedlot operators and packing plants. One producer who believed this cited a recovery program that attempted to stabilize calf prices at 90 cents per pound, which at the time it was announced, was a 20 cent boost from current market prices. The next day the packers dropped their price from 68 cents to 48 cents a pound and basically soaked up all the subsidy money. The price for calves was still 90 cents, but the program was limited to $1 billion, so this stratagem meant that the program ended faster and more of it went to the packers. Normally packers only made $20-50 an animal, according to this producer, while after BSE it went up to $300. The fact that most beef producers were having to repay all of the BSE emergency payments that they received through the Canadian Agricultural Income Stabilization Program contributed to an erosion of any social capital that had been gained through the initial payments. This situation is an example of what Flyvberg et al. (2003) describe as the "politics of mistrust." The erosion of trust had reached the point where a substantial number of farmers seemed to doubt the scientific explanations of BSE based on the prion hypothesis and were attracted to the alternative ideas put forward by Mark Purdey (2002) which were given little credence in mainstream scientific circles.

Rothstein et al. (2006) have recently identified a dynamic of upwardly spiraling "risk colonization" where regulatory efforts to manage societal risk may increase institutional risk by taking on unpredictable costs, hazards to legitimacy, and so on. Institutional risk may prompt greater regulation of societal risk factors, again expanding institutional risk, resulting in an increasing colonization of governance by risk-based logic. In the case of BSE in Alberta, governmental risk communication was quite successful in relation to consumers, due largely to pre-existing symbolic capital attached to ranchers, and helped to stabilize domestic demand, even if that did not prevent a major crisis due to the export-dependence of the industry. However, risk management through recovery programs has been much less successful. These regulatory failures have at least temporarily eroded the government's social and symbolic capital among beef producers and trust in future programs will be much harder to achieve.[3] Given the soaking up of most of the support funds by large firms, mostly American controlled, the decline of small, independent producers seems to have been exacerbated, which ultimately may erode the imagery and reputation of the industry that propped up consumer confidence.

Concluding Comments

The Policy Research Initiative (attached to the Privy Council Office) conducted a major research program between 2003 and 2005 on social capital and how public policy might appropriately address it. One of the five key insights that they identified provides a good reason for addressing the topic—which readers might be searching for after the critical treatment provided above. They noted that "governments inevitably affect patterns of social capital development. Taking into consideration the role of social capital (and the interactions between social relationships and policies) in a more systematic way...can potentially make a significant difference in the achievement of policy objectives" (Policy Research Initiative 2005:2). In other words, government action has an impact on people's social resources and it should be useful to take that into consideration before adopting and implementing policies. But there is a limit to the degree of reflexivity in this process. Their next conclusion is that "we need more concrete and context-specific empirical evidence for the best practices for integrating social capital into government policies and programs" (2005:2). Nowhere in the document is there any discussion of the ways in which social capital is already integrated into policy formation through the influence, for example, that industry groups and lobbyists have on decisions through shared social networks and backgrounds, campaign finance and the routine processes of regulatory capture. Once again, social capital becomes something within the population that governments can act on from above to guide the population without recognizing the great importance of social capital that already penetrates government agencies from outside, channelling and constraining the kinds of policies that are likely to be adopted. If social scientists neglect the "economy of practices" within which members of the elite convert social, cultural and symbolic capital into political influence and economic capital, and concentrate on adopting the current hot theme in order to attempt our own conversion strategies, our ability to understand the operation of the concrete political economy will be unfortunately limited.

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Acknowledgments

Research on BSE reported here was supported by a grant from the Alberta Prion Research Institute, Josephine Smart, Principal Investigator.

Notes

1 This, I will hazard, is a common pattern for anthropology: insights derived from ethnography frequently develop powerful new analytical frames, but those insights eventually become adopted by other social sciences, while anthropologists gradually vacate the scene and look for new niches to explore. Professionally, we are like grasses that first colonize bare sand dunes, but are soon out-competed by bushes or trees that take advantage of terrain improved by the grass's roots. This has happened repeatedly, most relevantly here with social network analysis, and more recently with transnationalism (see Smart and Smart 1998). Usually, the loss of our first mover advantage has been because technical standards or theoretical sophistication increased to a degree where most anthropologists felt uncomfortable. In the case of social capital, however, this seems to have occurred because it became a "big idea" in policy circles, and having an anthropological origin is not an advantage in such circumstances.

2 For Lyda Hanifan, social capital referred not "to real estate, or to personal property or to cold cash, but rather to that in life which tends to make these tangible substances count for most in the daily lives of people, namely goodwill, fellowship, mutual sympathy and social intercourse" (Rae 2003:141). Portes (1998) also points out that the concept draws on ideas about the positive consequences of participation in groups that can be traced back at least to Durkheim. Definitions cover a great deal of conceptual ground, but a reasonable working definition is "the information, trust, and norms of reciprocity inhering in one's social networks," without which "seemingly obvious opportunities for mutually beneficial collective action are squandered" (Woolcock 1998:153).

3 In the interests of space, I have restricted my discussion primarily to risk communication, omitting the much broader issues of risk management and risk society (Beck 2006).

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La dépolitisation de la notion de « capital social » : pourquoi pas un retour à Karl Polanyi ?

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La notion de « capital social » est à la mode. Cette notion nous entraîne, Alan Smart l'a noté avec finesse, sous l'apparence d'un vocabulaire progressiste, dans une sorte de jeu conceptuel flou et chaotique qui « désociologise » les rapports sociaux en les rabattant sur le registre de l'individuel, gomme la hiérarchisation des groupes sociaux au sein des sociétés et obscurcit les conflits entre les intérêts des différents groupes. Chaque individu est présenté détenant un « capital social » dont il est le responsable et qu'il peut faire croître et prospérer ; l'inégalité n'est plus qu'une question de degré entre des individus qui semblent avoir la liberté de se déplacer, à volonté, le long de l'échelle sociale. La vision optimiste de la société charriée par ce concept s'interdit de voir que l'espace social est un espace structuré à l'avance par les positions relativement stables que les personnes occupent et que ces positions sont elles-mêmes, dans la plupart des cas, héritées des histoires familiales.

Alan Smart a raison de souligner que ce concept « dépolitise » l'espace public en transformant les gouvernements en des instances qui s'appuient sur l'action communautaire et les réseaux de solidarité pour solutionner toutes sortes de problèmes, de la criminalité aux grossesses d'adolescentes en passant par la pauvreté. La notion de « capital social » compte, me semble-t-il, parmi les concepts les plus dangereux dont a accouché, ces dernières années, la sociologie néo-conservatrice américaine. Outre le fait qu'il exclut l'État des analyses comme le signale Smart, ce concept encourage l'illusion d'un social réduit à l'addition de la seule coopération entre les sujets sociaux : il n'est pas surprenant que Putnam (2000) aboutisse à une véritable dé-sociologisation de la société américaine dans son *Bowling Alone*. En reliant le capital social à d'autres formes de capital (économique, politique, culturel, symbolique), Bourdieu (1986) réouvre le concept en direction du politique et de l'économique. Hélas, ce n'est pas à la version bourdieusienne de la notion de capital social que les spécialistes de la santé publique, les politologues et les sociologues souscrivent dans leurs travaux.

J'adhère parfaitement à l'ensemble de la perspective critique, détaillée et nuancée, mise de l'avant par Alan