Why "Social Capital" (Like "Disparities") Is Fashionable

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Alan Smart's stated objective in his article on social capital is to answer the question, why is social capital, the concept and the term, so widely used today in the social science literature? While he points toward an answer, I do not believe he actually provides it—the one he seems to provide is not convincing, at least to me, because he does not consider the political context in which *social capital* appears in the social sciences.

First, let me note that while the term *social capital* is relatively new, the concept is rather old. I believe the first author to use the term was my own professor, James Coleman, when he taught at Johns Hopkins University in the 1960s and I was one of his graduate students. But the concept of social capital is much older. In fact, it goes back to the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville, especially in his *Democracy in America* (2000) in which he speaks at length of the sense of communitarianism in the U.S. that he saw as characteristic of American democracy. Communitarianism, and the sense of belonging and togetherness that went with it, was critical to his understanding of the U.S. He thought communitarianism defined the political and social lives of the communities he had visited in New England. The richness of what would later be called "civil society" in local communities impressed him profoundly. He contrasted this communitarianism and local social cohesion with the hierarchy, social tensions and indeed, class struggle in Europe at that time. He saw the U.S. as the way of the future, and Europe, with its class struggles, as beyond redemption.

I believe that de Tocqueville's idealized vision of American society is the reason the U.S. establishment has always loved him. He is the most cited European thinker of that time. In his version of the U.S., the country was an oasis of calm, in contrast to the agitated and tumultuous European political scene, where intense struggles were taking place around control of the state. In the U.S., in de Tocqueville's view, all was placid and cohesive. The central state—the federal government—barely features in his writings; it is something far away, in the background. I have published elsewhere a more extensive review of de Tocqueville's vision (Navarro 2002). But I believe I have summarized his position accurately here.

Social cohesion and communitarianism have long been major elements in the imagery of the U.S., based on the New England town-hall type of participatory democracy as portrayed in Norman Rockwell paintings. Actually, in my almost 40 years of U.S. academic life, I cannot recall any U.S. president who has not called for a revival of communitarianism. Republican presidents tend to do it with stronger conviction than Democratic presidents, but the call was expressed in strong tones under President Clinton's Democratic administration. Even in the U.K., Prime Minister Blair has spoken forcefully about communitarianism. He even replaced the famous Clause 4 of the Labour Party Constitution, which called for state direction in all areas of productive life, with a new Clause 4 that called for "the development of a community...where we live together freely in the spirit of solidarity, tolerance and respect." In this narrative, communitarianism is an alternative to state and public intervention. It is no coincidence that the Democratic president who most often spoke of communitarianism (and social cohesion) was Bill Clinton; he was also the Democratic president who relied least on federal public interventions to resolve the country's enormous social problems. He continued the policies first developed by President Reagan and the first President Bush, and these same policies have been continued by the second President Bush. All of them emphasized communitarianism as an alternative to federalism and state intervention.

Social capital is the individualized version of communitarianism. An individual holds capital derived from his or her membership in networks established in the community. In a major study directed by Professor Robert Putnam of Harvard University (who, with James Coleman, has done more than anyone else to popularize social capital), the states and regions of the U.S. were categorized by their level of social capital. As reported approvingly by the *New York Times* (August 26, 2001, A-1, A-14), New Hampshire was the state in the Union with the highest social capital. The *Times* failed to report, however, that New Hampshire was also the state with the weakest state government, the lowest state income and sales taxes, the smallest percentage of civil servants per 10,000 inhabitants, and the smallest Medicaid program, the state-run program for those referred to in the U.S. as the "medically indigent," which actually covers only 18% of those who need financial assistance to get health care.

Based on these facts, we can begin to understand why the idea of social capital has been so widely used in the social sciences in the past 25 years, and why it is promoted by national and international associations that play a central role in promoting the conservative and liberal conventional wisdom of political, financial and indeed, academic establishments. In the past quarter-century, we

have witnessed an expansion of national and international policies aimed at reducing the role of the public sector in people's lives, with the active privatization of public services and an aggressive deregulation of labour, financial, and commercial markets. These policies are primarily class policies, benefitting some classes at the expense of the interests of others—most particularly, the working classes. In the great majority of developed capitalist countries, capital's benefits have reached unprecedented levels, while wages and social benefits have stagnated or declined (see Navarro 2007). These types of policies are known outside the U.S. as "neo-liberal" policies, and their effects have stimulated a surge in popular resistance everywhere.

The promotion of social capital is part of the promotion of neo-liberalism. Indeed, the term *capital* tells us what social capital is. One indicator of the enormous conservatism in the social sciences has been the takeover of the narrative and conceptualization of these sciences by the language of neo-classical economics. The value of individuals is defined by their resources, the capital that allows them to compete. Thus, "knowledge" becomes "human capital," and "social networks" become "social capital," both types of capital being useful to the individual for increasing his or her competitiveness. Actually, Putnam recognizes this understanding quite openly: in his 2000 book *Bowling Alone*, he titles one chapter "Toward an Agenda for Social Capitalists." He seems to be unaware that this title is in itself a consequence of the triumph of the dominant ideology—the triumph of capitalism; this closes all debate about possible alternatives. The only meaningful debate now seems to be on how best to manage the capitalist system and what type of resources (human capital, social capital) an individual needs in order to compete, survive or succeed. Alan Smart notices, correctly, that analyses of social capital exclude the state but he does not explain why. A better understanding of the political context in which the concept is embedded would reveal that social capital is a political-intellectual-academic project offered as an alternative to state intervention. As in de Tocqueville's writings, communitarianism is favoured as an alternative to state action. We need to keep in mind that during the long period of neo-liberal dominion over the public sphere, government has been perceived as part of the problem, not part of the solution. As a consequence, public social expenditures as a percentage of gross national product have been stagnant or have even declined in many OECD countries.

Completely absent from the notion of social capital is any collective, rather than individual, objective: besides improving people's ability to compete, what else is there? Togetherness, after all, empowers the Mafia as well as the labour movement. To try to solve this problem, Alejandro Portes and others have come up with a distinction between "good" and "bad" social capital. But, as Alan Smart indicates, this simply shifts the problem to another level: what is *good* and what is *bad* and for whom? Moreover, togetherness can be either a tactical or a strategic collective objective. For example, developing a socialist society based on solidarity, justice, and authentically democratic institutions requires a different understanding from that provided by social capital. And, of course, for this objective, the key element is control over the state. Which brings us back to de Tocqueville and the European reality he was trying to get away from: class agitation in struggles to break with the false social cohesion of an order based on exploitation. In the idealized U.S., where de Tocqueville saw social cohesion, federalists saw exploitation (including class, race, and gender exploitation). For the federalists, federal government (which, as I've noted, is very much in the background in de Tocqueville's observations) was a key element of transformation of the social order. The federalists were the main force behind the progressive era in the U.S., responding to a widespread resistance to the exploitation existing in the country at that time. A similar situation is evident now as the huge human and social costs of neo-liberal policies being carried out on both sides of the North Atlantic are arousing considerable resistance and calls for broader public interventions.

Neo-liberal policies are the primary cause of huge and growing inequalities, including health inequalities (see Navarro ed. 2007). A great deal of resistance and struggle has taken place in response to the offense against people's interests. But, again, in the U.S. we can detect touches of de Tocqueville in the redefinition of inequalities as "disparities," transforming a social phenomenon into a biological one. In this new narrative, people are not unequal but just different, with these differences being part of the diversity that enriches human communities. Language is indeed political, and the terms used in the academic narrative are heavily value-laden. The fact that "disparities" seem less threatening to the U.S. establishment than inequalities is, in itself, a profoundly political phenomenon, even though disparities seem less political than inequalities. The term *inequalities* defines differences that are considered unjust. Inequality is the negative of equality: it carries the connotation of injustice. This is why the splendid sentence in the U.S. Constitution, "all men are created equal," is so threatening to those who consider an unequal order to be the natural order. The equality advocated in the Constitution should, of course, include women as well as men, and should not have

excluded a large sector of the U.S. population: African Americans. But my point here is that the concept of equality establishes the need to correct violations of justice. The new term "health disparities" is intended to hide and deny any need for correction. Like *social capital*, the term *health disparities* has become very fashionable. And, in both cases, the explanation is the same: the terms serve the social order that feeds them.

I should note that some fans of social capital refer to the French author Bourdieu, a progressive author who used the concept of social capital. They say to me: "listen, Navarro, you are simplifying. Bourdieu is a progressive author, and he uses the term social capital as well." I have great respect for Bourdieu's work, although I do not agree with much of his narrative. Bourdieu is internationally known but, in his lifetime, he was ostracized by the French establishment. I knew Bourdieu, and I am aware that in his ideological struggle, in order to make his case, he had to use the terminology of the intellectual terrain of his adversaries (the sociological establishment is profoundly conservative in France). Most of his work dealt with culture and how culture empowers people. When he spoke of social capital, he meant something very different from the social capital of the U.S. liberal and conservative establishment. In the U.S., social capital is promoted to encourage the integration of people into the capitalist system. In France, Bourdieu saw social capital as a way of developing an alternative to capitalism. He did not want to make social capitalists. Precisely the opposite: he wanted to help people resist capitalism.

The enormous dominance of the U.S. in the social sciences explains why social capital is now being promoted everywhere, not only by the U.S. State Department (Putnam has been speaking at conferences worldwide under its auspices) but also by the World Bank—a major transmission belt of neo-liberalism—and many other agencies. These organizations promote social capital as a solution to poverty, holding up Indonesia as an example, while ignoring countries such as Venezuela that are successfully reducing poverty through a combination of state interventions and popular mobilization. In the developed world, there have been strong attacks on the welfare state, which was an outcome of labour agitation and action over the state, an agency that is itself subject to class, gender and race forces. It would be useful if social scientists could recover their research focus on these points. Smart's article offers an invitation to do so. It should not be ignored.

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Social Capital, Civic Engagement and Trust

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Smart's essay on social capital in this issue rightly points out the confusion caused by multiple uses of the concept. His discussion of the relationship between corruption and social capital is long overdue. He also raises important points regarding the need for anthropologists to pay more attention to social capital within the state. My goals in this commentary involve amplifying and clarifying several issues he raises in his essay, specifically confusing social capital with civic engagement, trust and linking social capital. I also discuss the ways that the Canadian government and World Bank use these concepts.

Before focusing on these issues, the role of anthropology in understanding social capital deserves attention. While I agree with Smart that academic anthropology has largely ignored the concept, applied anthropologists have played a role in its development. Much of this work focuses on the poor and marginalized, as in Stack's (Lopez and Stack 2001) observations of the importance of power for social capital in poor communities and Newman's (1999) discussion of connections between cultural and social capital for inner city teens. Anthropology's traditional role as providing voice to those often ignored by policy continues to fuel works like these.

However, recent anthropological work on the state tends to focus on symbolic and textual issues, like the ubiquitous references to "neo-liberalism." A few anthropologists like Smart who study actual relationships and state activities note the importance of social capital connections. Stack's (1996) study of African Americans using