

Enthusiasts, Tacticians and Sceptics: The World Bank, Civil Society and Social Capital.

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On a good day in my old job at the World Bank, I would be asked to define "civil society" by any number of sceptical colleagues - a notoriously slippery task at the best of times, though at least it showed they were interested. On a bad day, they would ask me an even trickier question (what is "social capital"?), but worst of all was the inevitable sequel: in that case, what's the difference between social capital and civil society? Before I'd reached the end of my first paragraph of long-winded explanation, the questioner would have disappeared around the corner, back to the "real work" of lending billions of dollars to recalcitrant governments. Like pinning the tail on the proverbial donkey, defining these terms is a notoriously difficult thing to do (or at least to agree on), and while the definitions themselves may be somewhat academic, the debates that surround them are anything but. In the World Bank, as in all bureaucracies, this year's theory will be next year's policy, and policy has a real impact on ordinary peoples' lives - for good and for ill. As John Maynard Keynes reminds us (obviously not thinking of the World Bank when he said it), "practical men in authority who think themselves immune from theoretical influences are usually the slaves of some defunct economist." Civil society and social capital are increasingly-important entries into the international development lexicon, and both will be with us for some considerable time to come. In which case, how do we relate theory to practice in this field in more rigorous and responsible ways?

1. The Rise and Rise of Social Capital.

Although both social capital and civil society have a rich intellectual history, it is only in the last ten years that they have come to prominence in the decision-maker's world. There are a number of reasons for this, but most important has been the recognition that states and markets are but two components of an essential trilogy: society matters, social institutions count, and citizens make a crucial difference to the health of the polity and to economic success. Post Cold-War, "civil society" (the realm of citizen action) and "social capital" (a convenient shorthand for what makes societies work) have been accepted as key components of the development equation - even as a "magic bullet" that will correct the generations of state and market failure.² As a result, the two terms are often conflated ('they're the same thing

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² The World Bank's working definitions are as follows; "civil society" is the arena in which people come together to pursue the interests they hold in common; it includes all organisations and associations between family and state, except firms; "social capital" refers to the "glue" that holds societies together, being a composite of social networks and institutions, social norms (such as co-operation), and social values or attributes (especially trust).

aren't they?') or used in fixed association with each-other: 'civil society is what produces social capital.'

At the World Bank, this radical change in development thinking has been led by two people: James Wolfensohn (the Bank's President) has an intuitive grasp that the Bank's mission is about more than economics, and has been able to sell this vision to governments and the media, if not to every member of his own staff; Joe Stiglitz (the Bank's Chief Economist) has laid the intellectual groundwork for the Wolfensohn revolution, building on his own pioneering work on the economics of information and the role of institutions. Together, the theoretical and political advances secured by this unlikely duo have pushed the Bank into the mainstream of social development thinking. However, while these concepts may be increasingly popular, they are not yet subject to increasing consensus, even inside a supposedly-monolithic institution like the Bank. To tease out the differences that still exist, let me outline three distinct but overlapping schools of thought: enthusiasts, tacticians and sceptics.

For the enthusiasts (mainly economists in the World Bank's research division) social capital is the missing ingredient that can make their equations work, by integrating 'non-market rationality' into economic models. In their eyes, acts of kindness are reduced to 'information-pooling', and people associate together only when collective action generates a mutual advantage - not a very attractive vision of civil society to be sure, but certainly an improvement on the complete lacunae that went before. The use of 'capital' here is no accident, since economists respond enthusiastically to this particular word even if they ignore other expressions of what is 'social' about the phenomena they study. In the Bank's case this is certainly true, with a plethora of research studies being launched by economists over the last two years. These studies do show that 'more social capital' is associated with 'better economic performance', at least if the former is defined by membership in social networks and the strength of social institutions, and the latter is measured using conventional measures of income per head and economic growth rates.³ Similar claims are made for a 'strong civil society.' Indeed, the Bank's research in Indonesia found that membership of local associations had a bigger impact on household welfare than education, especially if their membership was socially-heterogeneous and overlapped with membership in other such groups. Economists explain these findings through the positive impact that social capital has on the costs of doing business (it's cheaper if we trust each-other), and on other factors like institutional transparency and accountability, levels of social learning and adaptability in the economy, and access to contacts and information - we all know how important our social networks are to success.

These conclusions are fairly uncontroversial, and have been accepted by non-economists for decades. What is new is the label 'capital', and its use in justifying the reduction of complex social phenomena to a series of numbers.

³ One or two cross-country studies also suggest that levels of income inequality decline as social capital increases, but this evidence is contentious.

Not all economists accept this label - Nobel Laureates Kenneth Arrow and Robert Solow explicitly reject the notion of social 'capital' because the things it covers do not share the characteristics of 'capital', conventionally defined - but there is no doubt that the concept has gained ground among economists precisely because it is couched in such familiar language.⁴ This is something that our second group of World Bank pioneers - *the tacticians* - openly welcome. For them (mostly other social scientists in various parts of the Bank), social capital is a godsend - a way, at last, of engaging economists in a serious dialogue about the social world, backed up by empirically-verifiable hypotheses. In the words of two leading tacticians, "social capital offers a way of doing good things better, and provides a unifying interdisciplinary discourse in which to discuss a range of otherwise disparate concerns."⁵ Since economics still reigns supreme, better to influence it from within than stand on the sidelines throwing intellectual bricks, and in doing this, social capital is probably the best shot we have.

The tacticians know that their strategy is something of a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they accept that much of the enthusiasts' current work is of dubious worth - it is 'preliminary' to put it gently, and needs to be continually challenged along the way. On the other hand, they don't want to alienate the economists by rocking the boat too much, so tend to approach disagreements in a spirit of consensus: let's do more research, and keep on talking - we're sure we'll come to some agreement. This is a very 'civil' approach, you might say, but one which may end in co-optation if the dialogue is conducted according to someone else's rules. Tacticians understand that the links between social capital, civil society and development outcomes are much more complex than the enthusiasts suggest - dependent on history and context, and operating through processes which we do not understand. They tend to emphasise the indirect avenues for influence between (for example) a strong civil society, accountable government, and pro-poor policy choices; or between the *character* of social capital - not just the amount - and the *shape* of economic performance. The really interesting stuff lies in the interactions between social, economic and political processes, not in notions of social capital divorced from its wider context.⁶ However, for the tactician, these are points to be addressed in a marriage, not grounds for a divorce. Their hope is that *all* the social sciences will be transformed as the Trojan Horse of social capital makes its way through the citadel of economics.

For our third group of observers - *the sceptics* (activists and academics outside the Bank and a few iconoclasts within) - this is naive in the extreme. Let's be blunt, they say: what is economically-important about social relations is already known from sociology and political science ('the more you have, the more you get'), and what is not known - how to reshape these dynamics in

⁴ A good summary of these different views can be found in 'Social Capital: A Multifaceted Perspective', edited by Partha Dasgupta and Ismail Serageldin (Washington DC: The World Bank, 1999).

⁵ Michael Woolcock from the Development Economics Research Group, and Tony Bebbington from the Social Development Department.

⁶ This is the direction of the most promising work on social capital by Michael Woolcock and his colleagues.

favour of peace and social justice - certainly can't be found through economics, however much it is reformed. In this sense, what matters is not more social capital, but socialising the production and distribution of capital in all its forms. Those who cosy up too close to the enthusiasts will be left by the wayside when their disciplines have been trivialised, de-skilled and turned into another branch of micro-economics. 'Social development is dead...long live social capital!'

The sceptics acknowledge that strong social networks and a dense web of civic associations are likely to facilitate certain aspects of economic performance. However, they don't accept that these improvements necessarily result in lower levels of poverty, inequality, violence and social exclusion. What makes the difference to those goals are *particular configurations* of social capital, civil society, state-society relations and many other factors, all acting together. These configurations cannot be engineered, subjected to universal prescriptions, or captured by the language and methods of the economist. What is missing from both enthusiasts and tacticians is any systematic analysis of how social capital interacts with the structures of power and discrimination. So although social capital raise crucial questions about economic performance, these questions need non-economists to answer them properly, or at least a completely different form of economics altogether. In this school of thought, the value of civil society lies precisely in its transformative potential: the ability of citizens to lever fundamental changes in the market economy, and the structures of politics and social relations that underpin it. This is *social energy* - the willingness of human beings to act from their ideals - not *social capital*. For the sceptic, social capital has less value as a concept, precisely because it is defined by economic efficiency; just as the power of civil society as a concept is eroded when civic groups are only used to deliver social welfare.

2. So what - do these differences matter?

In reality, these three schools of thought blend into each-other around the edges, and the same individual may find themselves in different places on different issues. Much of the social capital/civil society debate generates much more heat than light, especially disagreement around definitions, and the question of whether these are normative concepts (social capital and civic associations are necessarily 'good') or analytical ones (more of either can be 'good' or 'bad'). In fact these are not the most important issues: agreement on definitions is probably impossible, so we had better just be clear on what it is that we are studying, and get on with it (whether that be institutions, norms, or attributes like trust). Similarly, attempts to defend a normative understanding of social capital or civil society soon founder on the reality of ethnic separatism and destructive social networks - better 'bowling alone than conspiring together.' At another level, however, differences do matter, since they determine the questions we ask, the answers we find, and the actions we take as a result. There *are* real controversies in the social capital debate which have important implications for what we do in addressing deep-rooted problems of poverty and inequality. Let me mention three which seem especially important.

a) Contingent or universal?

At the heart of the sceptics' case is a conviction that social capital and civil society are 'contingent' or 'mediating variables' - they are by-products of politics, state building and social structure that are shaped by history and context, which in turn influence macro-social and economic outcomes. Social capital can therefore disempower poor people where the wider political setting is not supportive, and political and economic inequalities are not addressed. If this is true (as it surely is), then economic and social success is never the result of 'more social capital', or a 'stronger civil society', but of a much more complex set of interactions in which social capital *in some forms*, and civil society *in some circumstances*, are but a part. This is intuitively obvious from a glance at the USA, where high levels of inequality coexist with lots of social capital and dense civic networks, at least for some. 'Capital' is a stock - something to be built up, exchanged and depleted - whereas development is a flow, implying something that has purpose and direction. We accumulate capital, but social enrichment is a matter of behaving differently toward each other, not just adding on more social contacts.

If we are looking for an equation to describe these complex interactions, it would be something like the following: development = social capital/civil society + 'X', with the most important variables being included in the 'X'. In their different ways, enthusiasts, tacticians and sceptics are all struggling to unravel what lies inside this 'black box' - what is it that renders some configurations more successful than others in promoting development outcomes? This is an important theoretical question of course, but it also has fundamental implications for what we do as practitioners, donors and foundations. What forms of social capital should we be looking to promote? (presumably, those that are equally distributed throughout the population, and are used to promote the common good, not just individual advancement). What characteristics in civil society really make the difference? (presumably, an inclusive civil society that practices tolerance and non-discrimination). What types of regime do best in fostering these configurations? (presumably, open, participatory democracy and a state capable of guaranteeing universal rights). And - underlying all these questions - the thorny issue of whether intervention of any sort can lead to predictable outcomes, since the more contingent its construction, the more difficult it will be to encourage the 'right sort' of social capital. As we shall see, recognising this fact is the key to successful intervention.

b) Power and inequality.

High (and rising) levels of inequality pose a double dilemma for the social capitalists. First, they provide a benchmark against which theory and practice must be tested - do more social capital, and a stronger civil society, lead to more equitable economic growth? If they don't, one would have to question whether they are worth the fuss. Second, inequality represents a challenge to the theory itself: social capital is most likely to be used for unselfish ends when exchange takes place between equals; without a basic level of voice,

security and equality of rights, people generally lack the confidence required to reach out and surrender some of their ambitions to the concerns of others. But real societies (including civil ones) are fractured by inequalities based on gender, race and class. In these circumstances, does more social capital combat inequality or exacerbate it?

In answering this question, social capital theory makes much of the difference between 'strong and weak ties', or 'bridging' social capital (connections across groups) and 'bonding' social capital (connections within them). Bonding may accentuate inequalities since additions of social capital will be used to promote the interests only of the group concerned; bridging will reduce them over time as people dissolve their differences in a sense of the wider common interest. In order to promote economic development therefore, societies must move from bonding to bridging, in order to secure a social consensus in favour of structural changes in the economy, and rise above the constant struggle between interest groups that has de-railed progress, for example, in Sub-Saharan Africa since Independence. This is why the World Bank distrusts ethnic associations (like clans and tribes) and promotes business and NGO networks; and more broadly, why civil society theory dismisses primary affiliations as inherently 'uncivil.'

However, this explanation does not wash. Throughout history, strong primary associations have been essential to social progress - think of the civil rights movement or the value of strong women's groups in the fight against discrimination. Notions of the 'common interest' seem somewhat fanciful in deeply-divided societies. In an echo of reactions against communitarianism and the so-called 'third way', sceptics emphasise that conflict and struggle are essential to the advancement of people on the margins; conversely, consensus and 'partnership' (the third-wayers' favourite word) offer a false promise to the poor and oppressed. Trust is not an unalloyed 'good', since my confidence may be abused by less scrupulous others - this is one reason why aggregate measures of trust in society can be seriously misleading. Generally, poor people do best when they are cautious reciprocators - predisposed to co-operate but unafraid to retaliate when people take advantage of them. Yet social capital theory finds these things very difficult to accommodate, and impossible to model. Only countervailing structures of authority - not more social capital - can introduce increasing reciprocity into societies shot through by inequality.

Clearly, at some stage of their struggle, people do need to make political alliances with other groups who can push change through; just as primary ties must extend into networks that can mediate the increasing range of social contacts people need to be successful, outside the clan, tribe or village. As economies evolve, the demands of economic exchange grow more complex, and traditional social networks find it increasingly difficult to cope. Much of the insecurity we feel in a globalising economy comes from the weakness of these mediating structures at a time when labour unions, a job for life and other traditional sources of support are declining in importance. However, the goal is not to dissolve traditional bonds completely, but to find a better way of balancing the advantages they bring with the benefits of bridging - for both

individuals and societies as a whole. In India, for example, Hindus and Muslims have strong, separate associations, but communal conflict is actually quite rare.⁷

Understanding why one set of circumstances leads to violence and another to peaceful coexistence is an immensely complex task, but it is one that must be faced. We may never agree on the theory of how best to do so, but we all need to get the issue of power out into the open, so that we can understand what is good and bad about the way social relations are organised, and adjust our policy and practice accordingly. Precisely how does social capital, or civil society, address the issue of inequality? This is a useful test of their credibility as frameworks for the future.

c) Social capital and civil society.

Many people use these two terms interchangeably - as did I in my job at the World Bank when I was feeling lazy. Even in this article I come pretty close to using one to describe the other, and vice-versa. Yet if we are to be rigorous about such debates (as indeed we should), we need to recognise that - though intimately inter-related - they are really quite distinct. Many commentators claim that social capital is produced (solely or primarily) in civil society, but there seems no obvious reason why civil society should be privileged in this way, in contrast to interactions in families, workplaces, or even people's dealings with their governments. It may be that certain forms of social capital are more likely to be produced in civic associations and networks (though this depends on a somewhat rosy-tinted view of what civil societies are about), but if it is to be credible as an analytic concept, social capital must be something that can be produced in any sphere of human interaction - certain conditions permitting. In its broader sense, social capital applies to norms, rules and attributes that are co-generated across different milieu. In part, the confusion arises because there are very different understandings of what civil society actually is. Some use the term as a noun, to describe a certain part of society that is distinct from state and market (the 'third sector', voluntary organisations and so on); others use it as an adjective, to describe a certain kind of society marked out by particular characteristics (such as trust, tolerance, co-operation and other attributes of 'civility'). The more one leans toward the second of these interpretations, the more tempting it becomes to elide the terms together.

This is an important issue, since the choice between perspectives determines our course of action. Is the aim just a strong civil society, or a society that is just and civil in all that it does - in how it practices politics, economics, and social policy? Is the aim more social capital, or 'social capitalism' - meaning a less destructive economic model that generates material advances at less cost to ourselves and the world we live in? Michael Walzer puts this wonderfully well: "the associational life of civil society is the actual ground where all versions of the good are worked out and tested, but not where they are completed", since completing the job is as much a matter for states and

⁷ The work of Ashutosh Varshney at Columbia University makes this clear.

markets as for civic groups and networks. The same could be said of social capital. If we accept that this broader goal - the task of completion - is the one that matters most, the practical question that confronts us is clear: how does a strong civil society lead to a society that is strong and civil? How does more social capital lead to a capitalism that is socially-beneficial?

This is a complex debate, and largely uncharted water for the World Bank and others. Attention is often focused on the characteristics of civic associations and their influence on wider outcomes: for example, the benefits of internally-democratic membership-based associations versus lobbying groups and other intermediaries; or the link between 'civic values', organisational structure, and actual performance. Alternatively, we might look for clues in the different roles that civil society plays - in service provision, institutional accountability and social protest, and the implications of different mixes of roles for economic growth and poverty-reduction. The problem is that the empirical evidence on these links is very cloudy (it being difficult to predict a group's moral effects purely on the basis of its formal purpose, organisation or ideology).⁸ The purposes of civil society change as economies evolve, just as the most effective mix of public, private and civic functions differs from one context to another. What *can* be said with some degree of certainty is this: success rests on the capacity to transform states, markets and civil society from a base which is never fully captured by any of the three. Precisely how this capacity is used and where it is located are questions that should occupy the social capitalists for many years to come.

To summarise, the more rigorous we are in our treatment of these concepts, the more we must return to familiar questions of gender and race, states and citizens, and the material bases of social change. Conversely, the deeper we delve, the more difficult it becomes to settle on easy answers about what to, when and where, and this promotes a level of uncertainty that is especially uncomfortable for bureaucracies like the World Bank. Kenneth Arrow puts the central question clearly: "does the market destroy social links that have positive implications for economic efficiency?"⁹ If so (and the answer must be yes) can these problems be addressed through economic prescriptions? If not (and the answer must be no), do we accept the responsibility to undertake a journey into the unknown as equal partners - something which, if practice mirrors theory, social capitalists should be especially willing to do? To put things more prosaically, what can we do to help?

4. Is there a role for outside help?

As the sceptics would argue, and the tacticians mostly accept, the most important areas of social capital are also the most contingent, and the most difficult to engineer - attributes of trust, tolerance and non-discrimination. Conversely, the easiest areas to influence in the short run - like the number of NGOs and other civic organisations - may not be especially important in the grand scheme of things. Donor agencies like the World Bank have a natural

⁸ Nancy Rosenblum, 'Membership and Morals: The Personal Uses of Pluralism in America' (Princeton University Press, 1998).

⁹ Kenneth Arrow, 'Observations on Social Capital', in Dasgupta and Serageldin (eds.), op.cit.

tendency to focus on the short-term and the easily-measurable, and therefore tend to concentrate on the physical infrastructure of civil society and the mechanics of social capital ('forms not norms'). This may well be a good thing, given the dangers inherent in 'building' other peoples' civil societies, and lending them money to 'invest' in social capital. Enthusiasts do tend to see civil society as a 'thing' that can be strengthened using foreign aid, yet the record in this respect is very poor: Russia and the Balkans are not exactly an advert for our ham-fisted attempts to re-create a civic culture, especially in societies undergoing huge political and economic stress. The dangers here are very real - 'picking winners' by pre-selecting which organisations are most important (usually urban-based advocacy NGOs and networks of the civic elite); spreading mistrust and rivalry as groups compete for foreign aid; and creating a backlash effect when civic groups are identified with foreign interests. These are not genuine efforts to support civil society, but misguided attempts to manipulate its shape in accord with Western liberal norms. Social capital is much easier to erode than to build up, and sustained social energy only ever comes from within. At the micro-level it is certainly easier to be helpful (for example, support to co-operative management of water and other resources, or civic monitoring of public expenditure), but in the aggregate it is extremely difficult.

This is certainly the view of the sceptics, whose motto is 'do no harm - leave well alone.' Successful civil societies, and 'deep' social capital, take care of their own strengthening over long periods of time, and foreign intervention only ever makes things worse. My own view is that this is too gloomy; as the tacticians have recognised, the fact that change must be endogenous doesn't mean that outside help has no role to play - so long as it is sensitive and properly-rooted in the local context. There are at least four things we should be doing:

First, we need to understand the realities and complexities of the processes we want to influence. This may seem self-evident, but our understanding of both social capital and civil society in non-western contexts is extremely shallow - and is dominated by western viewpoints and institutions. What do African researchers think about civil society? Probably lots of different things, so let's seek out these views and make them the basis of our investigations.

Second, we should be supporting societies to pursue their own visions and interpretations, trusting that they will find the most appropriate set of answers along the way. That means holding back from 'picking winners' and concentrating instead on the enabling environment for civic action, or social capital formation - strengthening the legal, regulatory and fiscal framework; encouraging a healthy state-society relationship; developing the 'paths and meeting grounds' that are essential if people are to make connections; promoting the local roots of civic groups; and linking small-scale successes with the national conditions that encourage them to spread. These are less intrusive forms of support which allow local actors to determine the way ahead, but with more chance of success.

Third, we need to understand and support those special configurations of social, political and economic factors that seem to make social capital and civil society the handmaidens of justice and peace, and not just assets to be captured by elites. There is a huge canvass to be explored here, in state-society relations and new forms of democracy, the shape of civil society and the characteristics of different associations, and - most importantly - the creative potential of new linkages between states, markets and citizens: forms of business, for example, which compete successfully in markets but distribute profits with a social purpose; forms of social policy which deliver effective child-care without placing an unfair burden on women; and forms of politics which are less exclusionary and more motivating to the majority of the populace. The point is not there are universal answers to these questions, but that - through careful analysis, experiment and learning - it is possible to find the virtuous cycles which link changes in institutions (or 'structural' social capital) with changes in norms and values (or 'cognitive' social capital), attacking the inequalities that lie at the root of the problem, and re-balancing those 'strong and weak ties' along the way.¹⁰ It is in exploring these cycles - when social capital confronts the structures of power - that the greatest gains will be made.

Fourth, there is no point pretending that our current system for disbursing foreign aid is well-suited to the tasks that lie ahead. It is impossible to encourage attitudes of trust and co-operation through a system shot through with the opposite incentives - with built-in asymmetries between 'donors' and 'recipients', layer upon layer of conditions and constraints, bucketfuls of outside interference, and continuous changes of dogma and fashion (social capital being just the latest example). Even the World Bank has recognised the futility of this approach, and as a result is switching to what James Wolfensohn calls the 'Comprehensive Development Framework', a system in which countries design their own development plans and are accountable for their achievements.¹¹ Exchange between equals, remember, is the raw material of trust, trust is the foundation of co-operation, and co-operation is the only hope we have of confronting the collective challenges that face us in the 21st century.

4. Conclusions.

Neither social capital nor civil society is a solution to deep-rooted problems of poverty and violence, but there is something fundamentally important about both of them, despite the uncertainties, the gaps in understanding, and the differences and disagreements that arise along the way. In likening civil society to the Indian Ocean, Ramon Daubon captures the intrinsic value of these concepts well: 'everyone knows where it is, no-one cares where it ends and begins, and we know we have to cross it to get from India to Africa.' Despite the limitations of their method and approach, the enthusiasts are

¹⁰ The distinction between 'cognitive' and 'structural' social capital comes from Norman Uphoff: 'Understanding Social Capital: Learning from the Analysis and Experience of Participation', in Dasgupta and Serageldin (eds.), *op.cit.*

¹¹ My book 'Future Positive' describes a new system for international co-operation that might escape these problems (London: Earthscan, 1999).

welcome on this journey because they take familiar concepts into unfamiliar territory; the sceptics are essential passengers too, since they remind us that there are never any easy answers; but - nailing my own colours to the wall at last - the best pilots are tacticians, filled with the enthusiasts' fresh determination but savvy to the twists and turns of translating theory into practice along the way.

If we understand social capital as the cumulative capacity to work together for common goals, and civil society as the space where these goals are formed and debated, then there is no other framework we can use to pursue the visions we hold in our hearts. Completing these visions, as Walzer reminds us, involves the state and the market too, but they are the servants of a true civil society and not its masters. In pursuing this debate, it is best, I think, to be a 'sceptical tactician' in the best sense of the Kettering tradition (or should that be a tactical sceptic?): uncovering our visions of what is right and true through critical, public engagement and rigorous research. However, we should remember that there are always preconditions for a successful conversation - principally voice, security and equality of rights. Many people - indeed most if we look to the global level - are denied these preconditions by the forces of exclusion. If their claims to conceptual and practical advancement are to be substantiated, these are the forces that social capitalists of all persuasions must help us understand, challenge and overcome.

= 5,314 words (including notes)