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The Intracy of Social Capital Research

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The Intricacy of Social Capital Research

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Oscar Gabriel, Volker Kunz, Sigrid Roßteutscher and Jan van Deth, *Sozialkapital und Demokratie. Zivilgesellschaftliche Ressourcen im Vergleich*. Universitätsverlag, Wien 2002. 282 pages. ISBN 3-85114-571-2.

Robert Putnam (ed.), *Democracies in Flux. The Evolution of Social Capital in Contemporary Society*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002. 516 pages. ISBN 0-19-515089-9.

One of the clearest indications that a science field has reached maturity is the gradual disappearance of bold statements, which can be considered a typical feature of the starting phase of any new major research effort. Clearly, the field of social capital studies has now reached maturity, with the result that, in most of the more recent studies, the sweeping statements that dominated the field ten years ago have been replaced by a more careful analysis, paying more attention to the small intricacies of the topic. Since the early 1990s, studies on the origins and consequences of social capital have become a burgeoning research industry. A quick look at the *Sociological Abstracts* shows that there has been a continuous rise in the number of scholarly publications using the concept since 1993, and that currently more than 200 articles are being published each year on the subject of social capital. 1993 was, of course, the year in which Robert Putnam published his seminal volume *Making Democracy Work*, which discussed civic traditions in modern Italy. It was this volume, rather than the earlier work by James Coleman (1990), that caused the subsequent rise in social capital studies. Although Coleman's work can certainly be considered as scientifically rigorous and important, it somehow lacked the creative challenge, which seems a prerequisite to spark off a new academic subdiscipline. Coleman convincingly demonstrated, for example, that schools with a concentration of children from high social capital backgrounds (i.e., highly educated and well-connected parents) outperform schools that have a more restricted access to social capital resources. This is indeed a major finding, but it hardly comes as a surprise. While the Coleman approach has been a source of inspiration for replication research in various areas (among others, school attainment and professional careers) it does not

lend itself to answer one of the fundamental and perennial questions within social or political science. The only fundamental question to which it could have been related is: "how does inequality operate, and how can we fight it?" But the functionalist and rather conservative outlook of Coleman, who did not perceive social capital to be a matter of social inequality, blocked precisely this link. The Coleman approach, therefore, cannot be used for any kind of social engineering: one can hardly prevent the well-off from further advancing their network position and thus their social capital resources, while, on the other hand, very few opportunities exist to create social capital among the less well-off in society in a policy-induced manner. All of this helps to explain why, despite the methodological solidity of his research, Coleman cannot be attributed with the responsibility of having started the boom in social capital studies that occurred in the previous decade.

There are a number of reasons why Putnam's work was a more successful source of inspiration than Coleman's work. Putnam's claim that a vibrant civic community is essential to guarantee the stability of a democratic regime is in itself not a major innovation, since Almond and Verba had already made this claim in their study on *The Civic Culture* (1963). However, by providing a more historical analysis of the differences between the various Italian regions, Putnam succeeded in building a more convincing case than was possible with the cross-sectional approach underlying Almond and Verba's work. From a theoretical point of view, the appeal of the book can also be explained by the fact that it addresses two of the core questions in social and political science research. On the one hand, it discusses the question how societies succeed in maintaining social cohesion, a question that has been at the heart of social science research since Tönnies and Durkheim. On the other hand, it addresses the question how cultural variables contribute to the stability of democracy. The main claim in the book is that both questions have the same answer: the networks of civic engagement in a society are not just crucial for the establishment and maintenance of social cohesion, but also to ensure democratic stability.

Making Democracy Work can be summarized, therefore, in the claim that political culture and civic engagement matter for the functioning of democracy. In a series of subsequent articles, Robert Putnam advanced the further claim that civic engagement is clearly declining in the US, thus endangering the viability of the American democratic system. He formulated this 'Bowling Alone' thesis in a number of 1995 articles, but it did not find its way into a major book until the year 2000.

In the mid-1990s, these two claims ('culture matters' and 'engagement declines') defined and dominated the field of social capital studies, leading to prolonged debates about the state and the impact of civil society (see for a review, Stolle & Hooghe 2003). Two recent books, however, qualify and even

challenge these statements. In *Sozialkapital und Demokratie* a German research team argues that we need a much more advanced measurement of social capital and its effects, while in *Democracies in Flux* Putnam has collected a number of articles that argue against his 'Bowling Alone' thesis.

Sozialkapital und Demokratie is based mainly on a careful re-examination of the results of the World Values Surveys for a number of European countries. The ambitions of this volume are wide-reaching: not only do the authors wish to ascertain the exact characteristics of social capital, and how we can explain its origins, they also look at the question whether we are witnessing a gradual erosion of social capital in Western societies. All of these questions are dealt with in a rigorously scientific manner, which unfortunately means that this volume is not always an exciting read, although the structure of the book is very clear and well balanced.

To start with, the authors try to clarify some of the conceptual confusion that often haunts social capital discussions. On the one hand, social capital can be conceptualized as an individual resource as it provides individuals with access to other network members. This access can be used to gain information, but also to mobilize tangible resources or to advance careers, for example. This definition of social capital is clearly present in the work of James Coleman, but also in the research of authors like Nan Lin or Henk Flap. In contrast, a second definition, which might be labelled the 'Putnam approach', conceptualizes social capital as a collective good. Not only do network members themselves profit from the presence of social capital; its presence also allows society as a whole to function in a more efficient manner. In this way, even those who are not integrated themselves in all kinds of networks profit to some extent from the presence of social capital within their society. These two definitions do not exclude one another, since they clearly point to different characteristics and effects of networks. An essential difference, however, is that the 'collective good' definition entails that social capital can be a productive force: networks bring about an opportunity for synergetic action, thus creating output or resources of their own. On the other hand, if we consider social capital as an individual resource nothing new is created: it only implies that some people get access to already existing resources, while others are excluded. This implies that from a political science point of view, it is much more challenging to study social capital as a collective good. For those of us who are concerned with the future of democracy, it is important to know how citizens are able to reach collective goals, while it is less crucial to know why some people obtain a competitive advantage on others by their inclusion in networks. If we focus on social capital as a collective good, however, this entails the question whether 'social capital' actually exists as a coherent structure. In his 1993 volume, Putnam described social capital as a combination of networks of civic engagements, generalized trust and norms of reciprocity. While it is true that,

these attitudinal and structural components of social capital are strongly related on an aggregated level, the relation is much weaker on the individual level. This finding alone calls us to be rather sceptical about the socialization effect that is central to Putnam's approach: it is assumed that participation in voluntary associations and other interaction contexts lead to the interiorization of a more social value pattern. The authors of this volume argue that, if this mechanism was indeed as strong as Putnam claimed in his earlier works, then there ought to be a stronger relation between trust and participation on the individual level; they subsequently demonstrate convincingly that this relation does not exist. The only problem with this chapter is that they are trying hard to refute a thesis that is already outdated. It is true that, in earlier publications, Putnam and other authors have argued that voluntary associations can be considered a privileged interaction context for the development of generalized trust. In subsequent publications, however, it was acknowledged that there is nothing really special about voluntary associations: all forms of interaction, including informal interaction with neighbours, colleagues and friends, are now assumed to bring about socialization effects. As Putnam and Kristin Goss write in their introduction to the second book reviewed in this essay: "Early research on social capital concentrated on formal associations for reasons of methodological convenience, so it is worth emphasising here that associations constitute merely one form of social capital" (p. 10). Unfortunately, the *World Values Studies* contain very little information on forms of informal interaction, and so the authors of this volume have to limit themselves to a measurement of formal civic participation in order to substantiate their claim that interaction does not seem to lead to strong socialization effects.

But even a relatively simple or straightforward problem such as trying to measure civic participation in a uniform manner across nations proves to be rather difficult. As one of the authors of this volume made clear in a previous publication (van Deth & Kreuter 1998), it is hardly possible to measure participation in different countries in a comparable manner. Differences with regard to the structural characteristics of civil society are so overwhelming that union membership, for example, has a totally different meaning in Sweden than in France or Italy. At the end, the authors of this volume settle for a differentiation between three kinds of associations: a) sports and leisure; b) work-related associations; and c) social and cultural groups. For each of these kinds of associations, it is convincingly shown that the relation between participation and civic attitudes is at best rather weak.

However, the authors do not provide a convincing answer to the question whether it is absolutely necessary to make a distinction between various kinds of associations in the first place. The types of associations they distinguish typically follow a life cycle pattern. To summarize it all crudely: young people belong to sports clubs; people who are integrated into the labour market

belong to trade unions; whereas people belong to social and cultural associations more or less throughout the life cycle. The German research team demonstrates that each of these three types is but weakly related to generalized trust and other civic attitudes. On the other hand one could construct a research design that does not attempt to distinguish the various types of associations, but in fact conceptualizes them as cumulative forms of participation. In this volume, this line of reasoning is rejected on the ground that these three types of associations do not load on the same factor, and that from a methodological point of view, therefore, one cannot simply add up the membership in these various associations. It can be argued, however, that this structure of the membership data results from the fact that each of these types of associations tends to recruit members from a different stage in their life cycles. Given the cross-sectional nature of the *World Values Studies*, the consequence will be that these associations do not load on the same factor, and so are seen as non-related entities. Yet bringing in dynamic life-cycle variables would show that there is a kind of cumulative relationship: people who outgrow sports associations, because they have become too old, will tend to remain active in associational life, but in different kinds of organizations. The cumulative logic is indeed present, but only if we can rely on longitudinal figures throughout the life cycle and not if we have to rely on a cross-sectional measurement. At first sight this may seem to be a minor point, but it is the kind of measurement that would be needed to test the socialization effect in a more convincing manner. Socialization effects typically remain discernible, long after the socialization experience itself has ended. The total socialization effect of associational life, therefore, should not be limited to incorporating the kinds of association respondents are actively involved in at the time of the survey, but it should also include forms of involvement that occurred in the past.

In the first part of this book the authors offer an enormous amount of empirical evidence to demonstrate that there is no such thing as a coherent and one-dimensional social capital complex. The various structural, behavioural and attitudinal elements, which are considered as essential components of social capital, are only weakly related, and the causal relation between them, that is often invoked, cannot be substantiated.

In the second part of this volume, the 'Bowling Alone' thesis is addressed more directly: no evidence at all is found for a general decline of social capital in Western Europe. Generalized trust only seems to be declining in a systematic manner in the US and the UK, but in most other countries this pattern cannot be found. In West Germany, generalized trust even rose from 24 per cent of the population in 1959 to 42 per cent by the mid-1990s. The finding that there is no general decline of trust and other social capital indicators across countries also allows us to raise questions about some of the

causal factors that are seen to be responsible for the decline of social capital. In Putnam's volume *Bowling Alone*, a process of generational replacement and the spread of television are seen as the main culprits for this decline. However, these processes have been taking place just as well in West Germany and other countries where generalized trust has not been declining, so it is highly unlikely that these are indeed the underlying causes for a decline of generalized trust. If the spread of distrust is a typically American feature, then the causes for this process must also be tied to specific features of American society or politics.

Clearly this is an important volume in our ongoing efforts to arrive at a better understanding of the dynamics of social capital. Even though the authors have to limit themselves to a secondary analysis of the WVS-material, which does not offer a lot of information on social capital indicators, they succeed in exposing the falseness of some claims. They show clearly that all the bold statements about the way social capital is being constructed, and about the evolution of social capital in Western societies, need to be qualified, and that they are in need of serious testing. What we need is a more elaborated measurement of social capital indicators, constructed in such a manner that they are relevant for a specific context, and which can, at the same time, be compared across nations and cultures. This will not be an easy challenge but it is a necessary step; one that has to be taken if we want to develop social capital studies in a meaningful way. One of the major qualities of this collaborative volume is that it offers a lot of insights on how this future step might be taken, and the volume therefore sets high expectations for the future publications and research efforts of this group.

As has already been indicated, the sweeping statements of Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam stood at the origins of a lot of the current social capital debate. Therefore, it is rather strange to observe how, in a new volume edited by Putnam, some of his former claims are being undermined. Robert Wuthnow, one of the contributors to this volume, politely presents his chapter as an "addition" and a "qualification" of the *Bowling Alone*-thesis, but in reality his piece can only be read as an all-out attack. Wuthnow uses the *General Social Survey* time series to demonstrate that, even in the US, there is no systematic decline of trust or participation. In 1974, 75 per cent of all adult Americans belonged to at least one voluntary association; in 1994 the figure was 71 per cent, which can hardly be considered a major decline. Wuthnow therefore arrives at the same conclusion as Pamela Paxton, who used the same GSS-data for an article in 1999: civic community is not collapsing in the US. Most of the other chapters in this book are comparative in nature, and these too are highly critical about the possibility of generalizing the 'Bowling Alone' thesis to countries other than the US. For example, in his chapter Peter Hall shows that although trust levels may have declined in the United Kingdom, there is no systematic decline of civic participation. The same can be said of other

countries included in this volume for which reliable time series about participation levels are available.

Despite the diversity among the chapters, a major bonus of this book is that most of the authors address the issue of inequality, which had been missing so far in social capital studies. Peter Hall and others clearly demonstrate that the gap in social capital (measured as civic participation, political engagement, trust, etc.) between low and high SES-groups is clearly widening. While the highly educated groups within society seem to be growing even more politically sophisticated, the same cannot be said about groups with lower educational credentials.

Does the finding that engagement has not declined in most countries imply that the 'Bowling Alone' argument should be discarded, or that it is only valid for the United States? Not necessarily. In his closing chapter of this volume, Putnam does modify his argument to some extent. Without admitting it explicitly, he seems to abandon (at least in this volume) the thesis that Western societies are confronted with a general trend toward civic disengagement. What is happening is that one specific form of associational life is loosing ground in most major Western democracies. As Dalton and Wattenberg (2000) established in their volume on the decline of partisanship, political parties have been losing members in almost all countries. While almost 14 per cent of the electorate of OECD countries was a member of a political party in the 1950s, by the 1990s this was down to 6 per cent of the electorate. The turnout for elections also seems to be declining, although sharp differences from one election to another sometimes disturb this trend. Trade unions and churches have much less influence today than they had a few decades ago. So maybe the real trend is not a general disengagement, but rather the gradual erosion of the heavily institutionalized peak associations, in the political, social and religious domains. This would imply that we are not witnessing a trend towards disengagement, but rather one towards a de-institutionalized form of engagement (Hooghe & Houtman 2003). Or as Claus Offe and Susanne Fuchs summarize in their chapter on Germany: "the young generation is (...) rather abstinent in terms of participation in conventional forms of political action, although, at the same time [they are] quite actively engaged in those informal networks and webs" (p. 243). Although the Netherlands is not included in this volume (in my opinion a missed opportunity since there are few countries that have access to the same high-quality time series, going back to the first surveys of the Social and Cultural Planning Office in the early 1970s), the evidence that is available for the Netherlands supports the same conclusion: there is no indication that there is a general decline of social cohesion and civic engagement, but there are clear indications that a rise in new forms of collective arrangements is occurring (de Hart 2002). If these observations prove to be correct for other societies too, this could mean that

the 'Bowling Alone' thesis was not necessarily completely wrong, but that it was formulated somewhat uncarefully. What we are witnessing is in fact the next step in the trend towards more unconventional forms of participation, which are replacing conventional forms of participation, a process that was described in Barnes and Kaase's (1979) volume on *Political Action*. Although this problem is mentioned only briefly in this volume, it does not imply that there is any reason to worry about the future viability of democratic governance. Political participation might also become so strongly unconventional or de-institutionalized that it no longer adequately fulfils the interest aggregation function, which is a typical feature of every act of participation.

It is somewhat unfair to compare the volumes reviewed in this essay. The German volume is clearly the result of a group enterprise and this manifests itself both in the unified theoretical approach and in the solid empirical and methodological sophistication of the various chapters. This is clearly not the case in Putnam's volume, where various conceptionalizations of the same key concepts are being used, and where methodological rigour has clearly not been upheld in the same way in every chapter.

All things considered, it must be said that *Democracies in Flux* remains a somewhat troubling book. On the one hand, Putnam clearly merits praise for the fact that he invited authors who clearly oppose his work to participate in this volume. Few scholars have the intellectual courage to organize criticism of their own work. Yet, at the same time, the book does not really fulfil that promise, because Putnam does not use the opportunity to explicitly respond to his critics. He simply notes that this is a "quiltlike collection" (p. 393). For those who have followed the social capital debate as it has developed and evolved over the previous years, this is somewhat of a disappointment and a missed opportunity. There is a clear and often very sharp conflict between the data that was assembled in the volume that Susan Pharr and Robert Putnam edited on *Disaffected Democracies* in 2000 and the data that are included in this new volume. Of course, one cannot expect this conflict to be resolved easily, as one of my students, clearly puzzled after a lecture on 'Putnam and his critics', once expected: "But what is the right answer? Is social capital going up or down?" Unfortunately for my student, this question will never have a simple answer, but it would have been a nice addition to this book if the conflicts had at least been explicitly acknowledged and addressed.

Neither of these books is 'exciting' in the conventional sense of the word: they will not make newspaper headlines in the way *Bowling Alone* did. Instead they can be considered solid and therefore 'normal' science, pointing towards ever more complicated research questions. The bold statement that 'associations are good for democracy' has been qualified. The new question is: 'Yes, associations are good for democracy, but what kind of associations, in

what specific context, and with what kinds of members?' Now it has become clear that it is too easy to state that 'engagement is declining in Western societies', the new research question becomes: 'what kind of participation forms are declining, which new forms are becoming more popular, and what will be the consequences of this trend?' The fact that social capital has now outgrown the phase of bold statements does not mean that these statements have not been useful. Maybe, on the contrary, they have clearly defined a highly challenging and potentially very important sub-discipline within political science.

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