



The Usefulness—and Limitations— of Social Capital as an Analytical Tool for Progressives

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Why should progressive academics and activists care about social capital? This brief comment suggests two reasons why social capital is both an important and helpful tool of analysis—and one serious limitation on the concept that progressives must both be aware of and seek to call attention to in broader public debates.

The first way Putnam-style social-capital analysis can be helpful to the left is in the attention it calls to the substance of everyday life in capitalist democracies, and in that of the United States in particular. In general, democratic socialist-minded thinkers do not aspire to a society in which people are lonely, alienated, and spending more time watching television than in social (and political!) activity. Putnam's across-the-board findings of declining social ties in the United States stands as an indictment of American society along a measure which progressives should regard as very important: the tendency of a given society to promote loneliness and disconnection.

The decline in social ties and increase in social isolation over the past generation constitutes a major strike against American-style capitalism. In my view, Putnam's 2000 book *Bowling Alone* has indeed made a contribution to the critique of capitalist society and culture, although perhaps inadvertently. Some will find it all too easy to mock Putnam's fascination with bowling leagues and card games, but the trends he describes also refer to social institutions commonly associated with the working class (such as socializing in taverns)—as well as to political engagement itself. And, as Putnam shows, the types of political engagement that have declined the least—such as writing letters to Congress—are individualistic activities. Forms of political participation in which people must collaborate with one another have declined the most. Likewise, Putnam shows that engagement in social protest movements among people under 30 fell significantly between the 1970s and 1990s. While one can always quibble with Putnam's

efforts to identify the causes of these changes, I do not see how progressives can profess to being unconcerned about these trends, or deny that the rate of social and political mobilization in a given society is a relevant concern.

The second way social capital can be useful is in helping think through what sorts of institutions progressives should aspire to build. The claim, not so much of *Bowling Alone* but of *Making Democracy Work* (1993), is that social capital can be linked to many positive outcomes in terms of government efficiency and policy. Whether or not this claim should be accepted is one question. But if it is accepted, it surely has as much relevance to any plausible form of democratic socialism that might emerge in the 21st century as to welfare state capitalism. One need not think that a robust civil society is a *sufficient* condition for desirable political outcomes—a thesis that Sheri Berman's work on the relationship between civil society and the rise of Nazism during the Weimar Republic has effectively demolished—to think that it might be a *necessary* condition for a flourishing democracy that permitted much greater scale for self-governance in both political and economic affairs than the decaying democracies of today. An enormous amount of interesting and important work has been undertaken on what a coherent institutional alternative to capitalism might look like. This literature has primarily focused on questions such as what sorts of ownership arrangements, what sorts of economic planning mechanisms, and what roles given to markets would be both most desirable and most functional. The question of what role civil society is to play in governance, or how political and economic arrangements can support and not undermine civic institutions, has received less attention (with several important exceptions). There is ample room for further fruitful development of the literature on institutional alternatives, with careful thought about how civil-society networks might (or might not) contribute to strengthening a more democratic arrangement of the political economy.

This last point brings us to the central limitation on the usefulness of the social-capital concept. As explained very clearly in *Making Democracy Work*, social capital is a concept that is most useful in explaining social and political outcomes *when political institutions and economic conditions are held constant*. But holding political-economic institutions and economic conditions constant is precisely what progressives *cannot* and *should not* do. By and large, *Bowling Alone* shares the presumption that the fundamental institutions of the American government and economy are not simply the ones with which we are stuck for now, but the ones we are going to have for a long, long time. (This is the case even though Putnam, who calls for a “new Progressive Era,” personally advocates political and social reforms that place him quite on the “left” of acceptable mainstream political discourse in

the United States, a point that leftist critics of Putnam to date have not often acknowledged.)

Serious left analysis, however, simply cannot drop fundamental institutional critiques of American capitalism on the grounds that altering it would be very, very difficult. (All meaningful historical change has looked “very difficult” before it happened.) On the contrary, the left should be pressing as hard as possible to reopen the dialogue on where capitalism is taking us a society, whether a rich country might not find many more beneficial ways to use its prodigious wealth, and what sorts of institutional mechanisms would need to be developed to bring to life the core values of equality, democracy, and liberty. Indeed, if progressives can succeed in revitalizing social movements pertaining to core issues of justice and democracy, then the social-capital deficit observed by Putnam will likely, in large measure, take care of itself.

I would suggest, then, that social capital is but one tool that can be drawn on to critique contemporary America and to think through what a better set of institutional arrangements would look like. However, social capital cannot and must not to be allowed to become the sole prism of critical reflection on American society. It is the job of the left to make sure that does not happen—and to do so without losing the important insights the concept does offer.

References

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