

Beyond Social Capital: Social Justice in Recovery and Resilience

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Focusing on the case of post-Katrina New Orleans, this essay argues that the framework of social capital used by Daniel Aldrich in Building Resilience needs to be supplemented by an explicit account of social justice. Policymakers must recognize the ways in which social capital can exacerbate deep social inequalities that impact residents' vulnerability to disasters. Concern with strengthening social capital should be matched by concern with rectifying severe inequalities.

KEY WORDS: social capital, social justice, inequality, Katrina, New Orleans, recovery

Introduction

The twenty-first century, if humanity survives it, will likely be remembered as a century in which natural disasters came to be seen not as rare or unexpected events, but as relatively frequent events that are (in the aggregate) the predictable result of global climate change. Even if a consensus on the need for dramatic carbon reduction policies were reached immediately, it is almost certainly too late to stop the accelerating rate of natural disasters linked to extreme weather events (Emanuel, 2012).

Dealing with disaster is going to be a crucial issue in twenty-first century politics, and Daniel Aldrich's *Building Resilience* is a prescient use of the tools of political science to grasp how communities—that is communities that are not destroyed or do not collapse entirely—might most effectively respond to disastrous events. Aldrich's analysis of the ways in which social capital tangibly impacted the success of communities in four quite different post-disaster settings provides important insights for policymakers in crafting responses to future disasters. Aldrich's conclusions that policymakers should view bolstering social capital as a crucial part of pre-disaster preparation and that social networks and ties are critical resources in post-disaster recovery are persuasive, and it would be a very good thing if policymakers took due heed of this book's arguments.

At the same time, however, Aldrich's book also shows, perhaps inadvertently, the limits of social capital as an analytical tool. I focus the remainder of my comments on the closest-to-home case, that of New Orleans post-Katrina.

Social Capital and Recovery in New Orleans

As Aldrich points out, the Katrina case reveals the morally problematic aspects of social capital. Areas (zip codes) with higher pre-disaster electoral participation and hence presumably greater political clout were able to keep trailers, modular homes, and other forms of short-term, temporary housing out of their backyards, with the predictable result of frustrating the provision of adequate temporary housing in the rebuilding effort and concentrating the costs associated with such housing in certain less privileged neighborhoods.

This is an interesting story so far as it goes, but it is also quite incomplete, in two ways. First, Aldrich does not give sufficient attention to the fact that for reasons of race and class, many powerful elites in New Orleans did not *want* the pre-hurricane city to fully recover. Katrina became the occasion to declare New Orleans a fundamentally flawed, unlivable city, a mindset which in turn was used to justify shutting down public housing, implementing radical changes in the public schools, and refusing to make rebuilding high poverty areas such as the Lower Ninth Ward a top priority (Johnson, 2011).

Here, the concept of social capital needs to be married to the concepts of *severe inequality* and *solidarity*, each of which are operative at both the local and national scales. In the context of high background inequality, *politically efficacious* forms of social capital are also likely to be unevenly distributed. Hence, social capital will tend to multiply the impacts of social and economic inequality: the best educated, most economically stable communities will likely be the best organized and most politically connected communities, and will hence be able to influence the levers of public policy so as to protect their interests. Those interests may collide with both the greater good, and with the interests of less privileged communities—especially in circumstances, as in New Orleans, in which certain communities (and their residents) by reasons of race and class have been stigmatized as dangerous, unhealthy, and undesirable.

Scholars of urban politics have long recognized that localism is a severe problem, especially in conditions of high inequality (Frug, 1999). The usual solution among urbanists is to call on regional, state, or federal policies to implement institutions and politics that correct for local inequalities. In the New Orleans case, the federal government was (and is) the only plausible actor that might have compelled on the ground policy to (a) establish the goal of at least making it possible for all New Orleans residents displaced by Katrina to return; (b) place equal if not higher priority on the interests of renters and residents of low-income neighborhoods as the interests of high-income homeowners; and (c) compel all localities and districts to accept a fair share of what Aldrich terms “public bads” (locally harmful, regionally beneficial) like mobile homes.

This, of course, did not happen. One major reason why not is the federalist system and the unwillingness of the federal government to trump local and state politics. But another key reason is the weak sense of solidarity present in the United States as a *national community*. Here, Aldrich missed an opportunity to

contrast the contemporary United States with (for instance) Japan: the idea that all citizens in need are worthy of (unconditional) help is not a consensus or even dominant view in the United States.

Instead, there is a centuries-long legacy of viewing poor people of color through the lens of racial stigma; large numbers of Americans believe that it is perfectly normal for incredible numbers of young black men to be locked into prison and at much higher rates than whites committing similar crimes. Likewise, the United States has decades of experience in letting cities like Detroit, Cleveland, Buffalo, and many other smaller places wither on the vine and succumb to decay and eventually collapse as a result of deindustrialization. New Orleans itself was declining in population even prior to Katrina. This long-standing pattern of neglect towards urban places in need and towards the conditions of low-income people (especially those of color) in urban areas are a critical part of the Katrina story. Highlighting this backdrop helps illustrate why it is no surprise social capital exacerbated inequalities in the recovery process in New Orleans.

Beyond Local Social Capital

It also would illustrate why a focus on local social capital alone is not likely going to be enough to save the residents of the Lower Ninth Ward or other impoverished areas in other cities impacted by future disasters. A strong federal hand is required to provide employment, to help restore the economic basis of local communities, to provide an equitable share of resources to all neighborhoods, and to do so in a way that respects even the poorest of neighborhoods and their residents. Aldrich points out that many displaced New Orleans residents wanted to know if their neighbors were returning to their own neighborhoods before committing themselves. The dog that did not bark in this story, however, was a clear policy commitment to restoring the economic basis of low-income neighborhoods.

Put another way, Aldrich makes a compelling case that the efficaciousness of recovery efforts would be greatly enhanced by paying attention to social capital and bolstering social networks wherever possible—pre- and post-disaster. But (to amplify a point Aldrich makes with respect to the Indian Ocean tsunami case) a concern for *social justice* also requires that government make special, intentional efforts to reach—and act on behalf of—precisely those individuals and communities who are disadvantaged with respect to social capital and hence most likely to have their interests and needs overlooked in recovery processes.

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