Social Capital and Social Movements

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INTRODUCTION

Scattered mentions of “social capital” or similar terms date back at least to the 1920s, yet the concept did not gain currency and widespread use until popularized by the work of Robert Putnam in the 1990s. By the time Putnam’s book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* came out in 2001, criticisms had already emerged regarding the scope of social, economic, and political processes social capital was said to affect, the lack of clarity in its conceptualization, and about both the validity and reliability of how it was being measured (Foley, Edwards, & Diani 2001). In the years since, the scholarly literature using some conceptualization of social capital has exploded, with the term appearing in the titles of over 300 books and upward of 6000 scholarly articles. The diversity of definition and elasticity of measurement evidenced in much of the recent literature confirms concerns expressed a decade ago that social capital was becoming merely a catch-all concept capable of solving any problem from local to global and thus problematic.

Nevertheless, “social capital” should not be dismissed as a passing fad by those interested in social movements. It is a quintessentially sociological concept that has long been identified as both an important resource facilitating social movement mobilization and a significant outcome produced by social movement activities. A careful conceptualization of social capital that differentiates it from other forms of capital – material, human, cultural – has much to offer the study of social movements and provides a much needed analytical corrective to overly economic and individualist theories of social innovation and political change. The remainder of this entry clarifies the theoretical origins of social capital, defines it, and discusses its importance for social movements as both a resource and an outcome.

FOUR TRIBUTARIES OF SOCIAL CAPITAL THEORY

Four tributaries of theorizing have shaped current conceptualizations of social capital in the recent social science literature. The work of Robert Putnam popularized a notion of social capital which ties it to the societal production of collective goods such as civic engagement, a spirit of cooperation, or generalized trust and reciprocity, which are presumed to be unambiguously good and equally available for use by all members of a given society. In this tributary social capital is a social-psychological and cultural phenomenon congruent with Talcott Parsons’ melding of Durkheim’s macrosociology and Max Weber’s social psychology into the structural-functionalist tradition predominant in American political science since the 1950s. This view oversimplifies social capital by relabeling an older conceptualization of culture as the ideas, norms, values, and attitudes that get internalized by individuals in a society through a socialization process that resembles a sponge soaking up water. Students of social movements who wish to use the civic culture theory underlying this conceptualization of social capital should engage the arguments of Almond and Verba (1963) directly.

By contrast, the three remaining tributaries of social capital theorizing have much to offer people interested in better understanding political and social movements. That associated with the work of Pierre Bourdieu stresses differential access to resources via the possession of more or less durable relationships, socially constructed through “an endless effort at institution” (Bourdieu 1986: 249). In Bourdieu’s
view the fundamental structures that produce and reproduce access to social capital are neither the utility maximizing behavior of individuals, nor self-regulating markets, but networks of relationships connecting individuals, groups, and organizations. Where Bourdieu builds his notion of social capital on essentially Durkheimian microfoundations, James Coleman (1988) incorporates a similar understanding of social capital into a more economistic theory grounded in the rational choice of individuals. Bourdieu’s macrosociology owes its greatest debt to Marx, while Coleman’s methodological individualism remains solidly within the functionalist tradition of Parsons. Third, social network scholars have been working for several decades to develop an empirically based theory of social structure and action in which the resources embedded in specific networks are accessible to facilitate the actions of individuals within that network by virtue of their network location (Lin & Erickson 2008).

Despite their differences, the theoretical tributaries represented by Bourdieu, Coleman and Lin are broadly compatible for three reasons. First, they see social capital as relational and embedded in specific social networks and contexts. Second, social capital, like any other resource, is neither evenly distributed, nor equally accessible to all social movement actors in a given society. Third, all three recognize that social context influences the “use value” of social capital for the movement. By contrast, the civic culture tradition discussed above tends to downplay or outright deny the relational and context-dependent nature of social capital at the heart of the concept’s analytical usefulness.

WHAT IS SOCIAL CAPITAL?

Social capital is best conceived as networked access to resources. Social capital is a relational and structural concept referring to the ability of individuals or groups to utilize their social relations and positions in various social networks to access a variety of resources, and to accumulate a reservoir of accessible resources by consciously investing in social relations.

Unlike the political culture conceptualization of social capital, the three other tributaries of social capital theory all take the analogy with financial capital seriously. Despite their differences, they conceptualize social capital as resources embedded in and accessible through social relations that facilitate the flow of goods and services to individuals and groups in a society. Social capital is not, in these views, a collective good that individuals appropriate directly from their broader culture. Rather social capital is embedded in social relations and access to it, or any other resources it makes available, is not distributed equally among the individuals, organizations, or social movements in a society.

SOCIAL CAPITAL IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

That dense levels of pre-existing social organization among adherents facilitates the emergence, mobilization, and varied activities of social movements is one of the most consistent findings to emerge from nearly four decades of social movement research. Until recently social movement researchers seldom discussed these findings in terms of “social capital,” though if one reviews that body of work from the vantage point of recent theorizing, it becomes apparent that the structural and relational variant of social capital advocated here has long been an important element in the analysis of social movements.

Researchers have highlighted several forms of social organization that have served as the mobilizing structures for social movements: infrastructures, social ties and networks, groups, coalitions, and organizations. Infrastructures are the social-organizational equivalent of public goods like the postal service, roads, or the Internet, that facilitate the smooth functioning of everyday life. They are non-proprietary or open-access social resources. By contrast, access to social networks, coalitions, and especially groups and formal organizations can be limited by insiders. Thus, access to
resources embedded in them can be hoarded by insiders and denied to outsiders, often intensifying existing inequalities among groups in their ability to utilize crucial resources of other kinds. Because the resources embedded in various forms of social organization are not equally accessible to all members of a given society, social organization per se does not constitute social capital though it does increase the likelihood that social movement actors will be able to access resources. Social movement actors can be said to have social capital when resources are both present and accessible, in other words when they are actually available for use.

In order for social movements to convert social resources (the “raw materials” of social capital) into social capital two distinct, but necessary, components must be present. First, individual or collective actors must perceive that a specific resource is present in their social context. Second, they must have an exchange relationship that brokers individual or group access to a resource. Exchange relationships exist between two entities when resources of various kinds are made available and accessed. Exchange relationships are, however, not reducible simply to “social ties” in a strictly structural sense though they are closely related. All exchange relationships involve ties, but a tie per se only indicates the opportunity for an exchange and does not carry with it the social or cultural meaning of a relationship between entities. Thus, in a strictly structural analysis of social ties, networks or other forms of social organization are necessary, but not sufficient, for understanding social capital. Without some knowledge of the content of the social relations and of the specific resources available through them, one cannot assess the amount of social capital an individual, organization, or movement actually has at its disposal.

SOCIAL MOVEMENT AGENCY AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

In closing, the role of social movement agency and strategy in producing and utilizing social capital merits emphasis. Social movement organizations (SMOs) often seek to overcome resource scarcities in several ways. Resource aggregation refers to the ways a movement or organization converts resources held by dispersed individuals into collective resources that can be allocated by movement actors. Such efforts both rely upon and build social capital as they access existing resources, pool them, and make them available for specific movement purposes. Similarly, social movements often co-opt or appropriate resources by utilizing relationships they have with nonmovement organizations and groups to access resources previously produced or aggregated by those other organizations. Perhaps most importantly social movements self-produce needed resources through the agency of their own SMOs, activists, and participants. Movements produce social-organizational resources when they found new social movement organizations, develop networks, and form issue coalitions (Diani 1996; Minkoff 1997). All of these endeavors utilize social capital to gain access to resources and produce new social capital as an important outcome of collective action.

SEE ALSO: Coalitions; Interest groups and social movements; Micro-meso mobilization; Networks and social movements; Resource mobilization theory; Social movement organization (SMO).

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS


