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CONVERTING “SOFT” SOCIAL CAPITAL INTO “HARD” POLITICAL CURRENCY: PUBLIC DISCOURSE ON CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL ENGINEERING IN SWEDEN AND SINGAPORE

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As goods, money, and people move with ever-increasing speed across the globe, so do ideas too. The sometimes deceptive ease by which ideas and their concomitant concepts traverse cultural and geographical borders has also presented new challenges to conceptual historians. While some highly institutionalized key concepts such as “democracy” and “human rights” remain widely contested and gain a lot of attention—and rightly so—many other concepts appear deceivingly similar throughout the world and are subsequently taken to be less controversial. Analytical concepts provided by contemporary social science do often fall into this latter category, especially since many of them aspire to universal applicability.

Indeed, Western-style social science has fulfilled—and continues to fulfil—an important and often underrated role in the development and legitimization of the ways in which policy innovation is conceived, as well as the means by which comparison and benchmarking are undertaken. These practices—innovation, comparison, and benchmarking—are, in their turn, of paramount importance for the political and economical assessment of states, both internally and externally. The concepts through which these evaluative functions operate have a tangible connection with the flows of foreign direct investment, of creative people, and of innovative ideas. As such, these concepts are meaningful and powerful, yet their political attraction has not always been matched by scholarly interest.

In this project, “civil society” and “social capital”—two of the most popular concepts in contemporary socio-economic discourse for the last decades—will be put under renewed scrutiny. Certainly, these two concepts are well-known with regard to their diversity as well as to their history. Their descriptive and prescriptive duality has often been underlined. Yet, it is less well understood in which ways these two originally academic concepts have been bent to fit different political cultures and agendas in different parts of the world, in short, the ways in which they have been politicized.

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This project will revisit the wide-ranging debate on the promise and peril of social capital and civil society by contrasting the ways in which these concepts have been operationalized and interpreted in two widely different societies which, despite their many differences, also share many of the predicaments of being open, small economies in the midst of a global market. As this is best done from a historically informed standpoint of comparison, the project attempts to analyze how these two concepts have been used for (dis)similar ends and been given varying meanings in debates on so-called New Economy in the context of Swedish and Singaporean political economy \textit{circa} 1960-2008, respectively.

\textit{Sweden and Singapore as Models of Political Economy}

The outstanding speed and success by which Singapore has climbed from being a marginal post-colonial port town to its present role as a financial centre of global importance is often taken as an example for other states to follow. The fact that Singaporean economic growth has been combined with a rather rare record of social cohesion given the multicultural structure of the population has also attracted widespread attention. At the other end of the spectrum of political economy, Sweden—another minor, yet prominent actor on the world market, given its small size—has been held out by social liberals as a model upon which to base political programs in other parts of the world.

Both Sweden and Singapore belong to the top ten in \textit{The Global Competetiveness Report 2007-2008} (2007).\footnote{According to The Global Competetiveness Ranking 2007-2008 by World Economic Forum, Geneva, Sweden lands at 4th position and Singapore at 7th. The Report and the Index are available at http://www.gcr.weforum.org/} Both are countries with a strong commitment to social security and economic growth as political ends although they have opted for very different, if not diametrically opposite, courses in their attempts at attaining these goals. Both have strived to—and largely succeeded in—establishing themselves among the more competitive economies in their regions and at the same time maintained a stable social order, despite setbacks in the early and late 1990s, respectively. Both have made extensive use of regulation; Singapore in order to create one of the world’s “freest market economies” and Sweden with the explicit purpose of constructing one of the eponymous models for the world’s many “mixed economies.” Despite their different trajectories, their national political debates are both characterized by the high profile held by the concepts of social capital and civil society by all represented parties across the national political spectrum.
This project seeks to highlight some of the reasons for the popularity of these two concepts in these two places in a first attempt to critically assess their rhetorical potential.

Social Capital and Social Engineering as Modes of Governance

Incidentally, preliminary study results reveal that the ideas of civil society and social capital happen to capture very much the same idealized notions of harmonious social relations, trust, and cooperation—possibly also compromise and even consensus upon certain basic values—as does another political idea which is often considered to unite these two societies, namely their long tradition of what has been called “social engineering.”

Beyond the fact that social capital and civil society find their modern origins with John Dewey (social capital) and Karl Popper (civil society)—both of who made use of the social engineering metaphors in the 1910s and 1940s, respectively—the prevalence of this mode of governance in these two countries has indeed often been taken as one of their distinguishing features. As such, it may be seen as both a plausible key to some of their success, as well as a possible symptom of some of their problems. More importantly, if social engineering can be detected in such diverse forms of political economy as found in Sweden and Singapore, it would be timely to reconsider the way in which modes of governance and forms of political economy are often coupled in contemporary economic, political, and social analysis.

Furthermore, if these concepts are so readily reported from these two ends of the spectrum of political economy, we may also be motivated to ask what may be the relationship between the cultural constructions which underlie the political set-up of these countries, between the so-called “Asian Values” exhorted by the Singaporean leadership and the supposedly “Nordic” specificity of the welfare state which has become part and parcel of any Swedish political language.

4 For an overview and analysis of the conceptual history of social engineering, please see Carl Marklund, “Adjusting Facts and Values—Reconciling Politics With Science,” in Ideas in History, “The origins and development of social engineering” Vol. 2 (2007). The present author is also in the process of finishing a Ph.D. project entitled Bridging Science and Politics: Social Engineering in Sweden and the USA from Depression to Cold War (forthcoming 2008) under the supervision of Professor Bo Stråth, Helsinki University and Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Social Studies, Florence.

5 However, with the important difference that the concept of social engineering has only rarely been used by Swedish politicians and administrators—neither Social Democrats nor others—to positively describe their intended ends and means, while it has been regularly employed by Lee Kuan Yew and his generation of the PAP leadership to outline the PAP policy.
It would therefore be relevant to take a step back in time and beyond borders in order to better see how these two concepts—civil society and social capital—may be theoretically and historically linked to social engineering through a comparative study of how they have been deployed in these two countries. Only thus, it is argued, we will be able to critically assess their claim of novelty and originality of some of the political languages and discourses which have followed upon the recent popularity of the political project of the “New Economy.”

It appears that much of the current project of enhancing the accumulation of social capital through civil society aims at converting the “soft” assets of individuals into the political and economical “hard currency” needed by the collective to hedge its bets and secure its gains on the global market. As such, the conceptual history of these two “new” concepts does not seem to belie their political affinity with the social engineering of the past, an affinity which this project seeks to critically analyze.