SOCIAl CAPITAL

SOCIAL CAPITAL. The concept of social capital recently entered the study of politics through sociology, especially the sociology of education. However, the phenomena that the concept refers to—norms and networks of reciprocity, trust, and cooperation that provide opportunity for individual advancement, ethnic entrepreneurship, economic development, civic participation, and other private and social goods—have long been central to political inquiry. Whereas physical capital describes tangible investment in infrastructure, such as factories and equipment, and human capital refers to intangible investment in individuals, such as education and skill training, social capital often describes investments in the collective capacity to achieve common goals.

This definition—the collective capacity to achieve common ends—is substantially different from the concept’s original formulation. Pierre Bourdieu (1986) introduced the concept to the social sciences. For Bourdieu, social capital describes the social networks that an individual may access for personal gain, and which can be converted to and from economic, cultural, and symbolic capital.

James Coleman (1990) defining social capital as social arrangements that facilitate individual goal attainment, established the concept within the field of education. For Bourdieu, and Coleman, social capital involves access to social structures that can facilitate individual pursuits. Many studies of social capital focus on varieties of reciprocal social relations that are consistent with a rational choice approach to understanding social interactions. Revolving credit schemes and other informal credit markets, for example, where personal relations, based on locality or ethnicity, often provide sanctions and incentives for cooperative behavior, are a common focus of studies of social capital.

Robert Putnam (1993, 2000) brought the concept to political science, and defined it in a markedly different way. He defines social capital as traditions of civic engagement that promote the success of political institutions. The attempt to expand the concept of social capital beyond the instrumental incentives of individuals to the cultural values of collectivities has been plagued by methodological flaws that are familiar to critics of political culture approaches to the study of politics. Many suspect that stretching the concept in this way may endanger its heuristic value.

The suggestion behind the market metaphor is that the collective capacity of groups to achieve common ends may be reinvested and accumulated through responsible use and squandered through irresponsible use. To build social capital is difficult; to destroy it is easy. Social capital is also often theorized to promote more effective use of physical and human capital.

Maintenance of social capital can come with high cost to the freedom of individuals. Further, while social capital may involve pursuit of a common end, it is not always used for the common good. Social capital can be deployed for oppressive as well as for progressive ends. Loyalty to country, shared values, and networks of reciprocity and trust have been tremendously useful to genocidal regimes and racist societies.

(See also CIVIL SOCIETY.)


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