

The 2022 Clarence Ayres Scholar

Social Capital and Civil Society in Public Policy, Social Change, and Welfare

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Abstract: Mainstream economics reduces concepts of social capital and civil society to means for profit and competition, reproducing inequality and power. Alternative approaches identify social capital with state-society synergy relations and generalized networks of cooperation, which enable the civil society to promote solidarity, democracy, public policy, social change, and welfare. Similarly, Post-Keynesian Institutionalism recognizes the creative role of the state, democratic institutions, and civic values. However, questions remain regarding how social groups and the state interact and promote change. This article seeks to fill that void by connecting these analyses with the literature on the commons and participatory and deliberative democracy.

Keywords: social capital, civil society, public policy, commons, participatory and deliberative democracy

JEL Classification Codes: A13, B52, B55, D70, Z18

Since the late twentieth century, we have witnessed a resurgence of academic and political interest in the concepts of social capital and civil society. Social capital is usually identified with social norms and networks of reciprocity, trust, and cooperation. Civil society consists of non-governmental and not-for-profit self-governing organizations and informal groups. Elements of social capital were considered crucial for civil society, as social norms and networks of cooperation and trust appeared to enhance civil society's ability to cultivate solidarity, democratic ideals, public policy, and social welfare. National governments and international organizations introduced these concepts in their development policies and programs to stress the role social groups play in achieving the programs' economic and political objectives. In fact, the approval of funds was conditional on the applicants' ability to demonstrate the existence of active social networks and organizations, which would undertake the management of funds and actively participate in program planning and implementation.

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However, under the influence of Third Way politics and the Post-Washington Consensus, those initiatives most often reproduced dominant rational-choice principles and neoliberal agendas (e.g., Fine 2010, 98, 111). They reduced social capital and civil society to a mere means for serving market objectives of profit and competition, which reproduce social inequalities and power structures. Consequently, they ignored the “dark side” of social capital, whereby powerful economic and political groups pursue their own interests at the expense of broader social objectives. Nonetheless, there are studies on social capital and civil society that aim to unravel those conditions under which individuals and groups can build norms and networks of cooperation and mobilize social forces to scrutinize and challenge the social injustices and inequalities created by power relations, market competition, and undemocratic states.

Post-Keynesian Institutionalism recognizes the creative role of the state (for example, see Ayres 1967; Larson 2002; Whalen 2008 and 2020). It understands that the state has the power to make legislative, administrative, and judicial decisions, which define and legitimize rights and freedoms in the economy. It also understands that conflicting economic classes and interests compete in the political field to consolidate their power and shape the social order through the state apparatus. However, important questions remain: How do social groups organize and mobilize to voice collective needs and concerns? How do they make state officials accountable and responsive? How do they challenge and resist powerful groups that pursue particularized interests via clientelistic relations with state officials and policymakers?

This article attempts to respond to these questions. First, it discusses the relationship of social capital and civil society with the state and public policy. According to the social capital literature, social transformation and welfare require synergistic relations, as well as generalized norms and networks of reciprocity, cooperation, and trust, which include diverse social groups and transcend the public-private divide. In the next section, the article takes the argument further by connecting studies on social capital and civil society with the literature on participatory and deliberative democracy and the commons. It stresses the idea that processes of commoning and democratic participation and deliberation have the potential to provide the basis for creating synergistic relations and generalized cooperation and trust. The article closes with some concluding remarks.

Social Capital and Civil Society and their Relationship with the State and Public Policy

The article adopts an alternative approach to social capital (for a detailed analysis, see van Staveren 2001; Christoforou 2011). The underlying idea is that human beings do not primarily follow their egotistical instincts and impulses; rather they have naturally and historically evolved to equally consider altruistic and cooperative motivations in their behavior. Social norms and networks are not subject to the reductionist confines of the utility-maximization and capital-accumulation framework of neoclassical economics. They are also pursued for their intrinsic value which reflects people’s social, political, and moral considerations; they derive from social, political, and moral processes of individual agency that create common identities, needs, and demands; they express people’s commitment to shared values and institutions of trust, cooperation, and reciprocity; and, finally, they inspire a sense of responsibility and concern toward others. Thus, norms and networks are characterized by a multiplicity of motives, conditions, and social outcomes, which reflect different perceptions and visions of development, redistribution, efficiency, and fairness.

A vast literature versed in the Institutional and Post-Keynesian traditions explains how economic behavior is socially embedded and motivated by considerations beyond the narrowly defined instincts of *homo economicus*.¹

Social capital is often identified with the notion of civil society (for an overview, see Keane 1998; Edwards 2014). Discussions on state-society relations date back to the philosophers of ancient civilizations (such as Aristotle's concept of the *polis*, or city-state, as a civil community; see also Adloff 2021). In the contemporary social capital literature, it is argued that elements of social capital enable civil society organizations to cultivate values of social participation, democracy, and welfare, and thus to play a critical role in the formation of public policy. However, contemporary views tend to overlook the power relations and social injustices that hinder individuals' capacity to partake in democratic deliberations (Roberts 2000; see also Edwards 2014). Radical approaches to civil society perceive it as a source of social resistance and transformation. While imprisoned by the Italian Fascist regime in 1926, Antonio Gramsci introduced the concept of hegemony as a form of domination, which relied on the expansion of the state, including the ways it extends into the complex institutions and organizations of civil society. Yet he also envisioned a civil society where an alternative moral and intellectual order, what he termed the counter-hegemony, would emanate from the collective efforts of the working class, intellectuals, and social organizations, with an aim to transform economies and societies (see Gramsci 1971).

To determine the economic and political impact of social capital and civil society we need to examine their relationship with the state and public policy. A rich source of theoretical and empirical studies on the relationship between social capital and the state is provided by a series of programs, which were funded by supranational organizations and national governments to pursue a variety of objectives, including state-building, conflict resolution, economic development, social regeneration, and social provisioning, at the local and regional levels. Applicants of these programs received approval for funds with the condition of utilizing forms of social capital, which would enable the less privileged social groups of local communities to build social networks across the public-private divide and take active part in collective decision-making processes concerning project planning, implementation, and evaluation. However, under the influence of Third Way politics and the Post-Washington Consensus, these initiatives adopted rational-choice principles, incentive-based mechanisms, and neoliberal agendas. Therefore, they overlooked the impact of contextual factors, such as the unequal distribution of resources, the capture of powerful groups, and welfare state retrenchment, which prevented the less privileged from exploiting opportunities for social participation, empowerment, and the provision of welfare goods and services (e.g., Fine 2001,123). Rather than a source for social transformation, social capital and civil society were perceived as an additional social means for securing profit, competitiveness, growth, and good governance, which committed the state to cost-benefit analyses in policymaking, efficiency-enhancing public management, and the individualization and marketization of welfare.² Hence, both civil society and government become restricted and frugal in pursuing social values and controlling markets.

¹ See Wrenn and Waller (2018) for an analysis of the ways mainstream economics has distorted the social and ethical dimensions of human behavior.

² According to Michel Foucault, neoliberalism is a mode of governmentality, where the social is organized through economic incentives and political power is organized on the competitive logic of markets (Madra and Adaman 2014).

Yet there are studies in which concepts of social capital and civil society are used as expressions of active citizenry, participatory and deliberative democracy, and social transformation (Christoforou 2013). Some authors observe that social participation and welfare can be achieved when social capital develops synergistic relations across diverse groups and with the state (Evans 1996b; Woolcock 1998; Rothstein and Stolle 2003; Andriani and Christoforou 2016; Pisani et al. 2017). Michael Woolcock (1998) introduces two concepts that refer to distinct but complementary forms of social capital, namely “embeddedness” and “autonomy.” “Embeddedness” emphasizes the importance of what we refer to as “bonding” social capital, while “autonomy” stresses the importance of “bridging” social capital. Forms of bonding social capital are necessary to support intra-group ties and pursue collective goals. To avoid the exclusion, introversion, and discrimination by intra-group ties serving particularized interests, more generalized forms of social capital that transcend local or special-interest groups and bridge ties across multiple, diverse groups must be established. In other words, embedded social relations need to be combined with autonomous social ties. At the micro level, autonomy enables members of local groups to create links with diverse groups outside their own locality, and to explore different opportunities and capabilities, including job positions, access to educational and health facilities, as well as new ideas, visions, and practices of collective action, participation, and welfare. At the macro level, autonomy enables local groups to create generalized norms and networks of cooperation and solidarity and thus overcome the impact of powerful (public and private) groups, which serve particularized interests and function as vehicles of corruption, nepotism, and exploitation. In this manner, government officials and policymakers become accountable to broader social welfare objectives.

Questions may arise regarding the potential of civil society to build synergistic relations within a context of authoritarian governance and sectarian societies. However, there are studies which evidence the capacity of social capital to mediate between conflicting interests in synergy with the state to produce social change (see, for instance, Evans 1996a and 1996b). It is argued that in such societies the real key to synergy is translating social ties from engines of parochial loyalties into vehicles for more encompassing forms of organization through political activity and debate. To achieve this transformation, citizens need to foster the consolidation of representative and autonomous social organizations; forge an objective alliance between social movements and reformists; and promote structures of bureaucratic organization on the basis of impartiality, transparency, and credibility (Evans 1996a and 1996b; Harriss 2002). In this manner, social struggles and conflict can result in the emergence of different forms of social capital which pursue collective goals and overcome power and inequality (Paterson 2001). For example, in response to the financial crisis and the fiscal consolidation policies, a series of new informal networks emerged in Greece ranging from self-help neighborhood groups to second-hand shops, social kitchens, even local currencies and barter economy institutions, all aiming to respond to society’s needs and concerns, which conventional, formal organizations operating in the market, the state, and the civil society were unable to satisfy (Sotiropoulos and Bourikos 2014). Karl Polanyi uses the term “re-embeddedness” to explain the ways in which the state and the civil society work in synergy to promote values and institutions of redistribution and reciprocity against the social “dis-embeddedness” imposed by unregulated markets (Polanyi 1944).

Overall, social capital and civil society have the potential to build synergistic relations and generalized cooperation, which transform economies and societies toward the social

goals of equality and justice. But how can social capital and civil society develop this capacity? To answer this question, it might be pertinent to consult the literature on participatory and deliberative democracy and the commons.

Galvanizing Civil Society: Commoning and Democratic Participation and Deliberation

When mainstream economics talks about democracy, it focuses mainly on competitive modes of democracy, which emphasize voting as a mechanism for aggregating political preferences and choosing representatives and leaders. Yet little attention has been given to participatory and deliberative modes of democracy: on the one hand, participatory democracy stresses the direct involvement of all those affected by certain activities in processes of political discourse and decision-making; on the other hand, deliberative democracy highlights rational discussion and deliberation in the public space in order to solve conflicts of interest by means of transformation rather than preference aggregation (Enjolras and Steen-Johnson 2015). Mainstream economics fails to explain modes of participation and deliberation because it adopts a reductionist purview of economic behavior that excludes the social and moral values which constitute the quintessential element of democracy and express commitment and solidarity toward the needs and concerns of others (Sen 1999).

For Post-Keynesians, the aim of economic policy is primarily the development of an open, democratic, and civilized society, by appealing to the social and moral values upheld by individuals and groups in their economic transactions and social relationships, namely loyalty, responsibility, excellence, love, and compassion (Marangos 2000). Similar views are expressed by the American institutionalists. For instance, John R. Commons focuses on the concept of “collective democracy,” which draws our attention not only to the social outcomes produced by democratic participation, but also to the processes themselves, where all affected parties form groups of common interests (like representatives of labor and capital in industrial relations) and partake in collective bargaining and negotiated problem-solving (Commons 1950; see also Whalen 2022). Post-Keynesian Institutionalism (PKI) focuses on mediating structures, such as family, church, voluntary associations, neighborhood, and subculture, which operate beyond the market and the state, take an active role in economic planning, and promote values and institutions of participatory, democratic decision-making (Wilber and Jameson 1983).

Generally, PKI focuses on state intervention (including the judicial system) as the central means for coordinating the conflicting interests of social groups, and for regulating markets on the basis of civic values. This article stresses the idea that civil society can play a more active role in creating the social values and prefigurative relations that will transform economies and societies and promote participation and democracy. In fact, to ensure the conditions for a truly participatory and deliberative democracy, a three-way relationship is suggested between representative bodies, administrative structures, and self-governing groups of civil society (Devine 1988; Boje 2017). A case in point is the application of processes of participatory budgeting, which take place within firms, social organizations, or the broader community, and include all those interested in the activities of the collective to discuss proposals for projects and decide on the allocation of funds.

Values and practices of participatory and deliberative democracy are related to the commons. The commons is understood not as a simple pool of shared resources, but as a social sphere of life, which mainly challenges market dominance and protects against social

injustices and inequalities. Thus, the commons is a process of social interaction, struggle, and transformation, or a process of “commoning” where production and reproduction take place under collective labor, equal access to resources, and egalitarian forms of decision-making (Fournier 2013; Wainwright 2013; Akbulut 2017). As Hilary Wainwright (2013) argues, commoning requires a shift from an instrumental logic to a prefigurative one, that is, toward a logic whereby we act in the present according to the social values we are trying to envision and apply in our daily lives in the future. Our capacity to labor, or to create, is understood as a commons, not as a commodity, because it is not only *for* the good life, it is itself *part of* the good of life. Hence, we are in want of building alternative frameworks for reflection and decision-making in production, evaluation, and collective bargaining, which go beyond standard practices of individualized wage and income maximization, and take account of values of participatory democracy, social and environmental accounting, and the abolition of social segregation and inequalities (Wainwright 2013).

Moving beyond conventional institutions of civil society and public policy is not as difficult as it seems. According to Julie-Katherine Gibson-Graham (2003 and 2006), these values and practices *already exist*. Beneath the systems of formal market transactions, wage labor, and capitalist enterprise, we encounter a myriad of submerged but sustaining alternative forms of labor and production, which interact with one another to form a diverse economy characterized by multiplicity, interdependence, and potentiality. It is within this diverse economy that we can discover alternative, non-capitalist subjectivities, rationalities, and imaginaries, and learn how to create collective modes of production and community economies founded on values and practices of participatory and deliberative democracy. In other words, social interaction and collective learning are essential elements of the commoning process, which raise our awareness of social injustices and teach us how to organize collectively to restore social welfare.

Fikret Adaman and Pat Devine (2002) discuss the benefits of a participatory economic system in relation to the production and allocation of material and non-material resources, and to the implementation of inclusive and democratic processes of participation and decision-making. They define a participatory economic system as an interlocking network of social relationships and institutions, where the values and interests of people in the different aspects of their lives interact and shape one another in a discursive process of decision-making through negotiation and cooperation. Generalized norms and networks of participation constitute a crucial element of this economic system: all those with either a relevant input to contribute or a legitimate interest in the outcome (i.e., all those who are affected by an activity and operate in the market, the state, or the civil society) are actively involved on an equal footing.

Researchers and academics can play a critical part in this process of learning and co-transformation. Julie-Katherine Gibson-Graham and Gerda Roelvink (2009) introduce what they term “hybrid research collectives,” where researchers and academics collaborate with all community members whose interests are affected by a certain activity—including workers, pensioners, students, local producers, and administrators—with an aim to discuss and resolve socio-economic problems on the basis of social welfare objectives. Researchers and community members engage in a discursive process, based on participatory democratic principles and practices, and are jointly mobilized and re-constituted to embody a new “econo-sociality.” In this process, civil society organizations may contribute to the creation of transformational and prefigurative relations toward alternative economies by envisioning

and experimenting with new ideas and practices for labor and production on the basis of collective and democratic values.

Conclusions

In this article, the discussion focused on how social capital and civil society can impact public policy. It was argued that a kind of social capital founded on state-society synergy and generalized norms and networks of cooperation and trust, can enable civil society organizations to scrutinize and challenge the injustices and inequalities created by power relations, market competition, and undemocratic states.

To explore the conditions under which social capital and civil society can develop the capacity for social transformation and public welfare, studies on social capital and civil society were brought together with the literature on the commons and participatory and deliberative democracy. Processes of commoning and democratic participation and deliberation are necessary to ensure that social capital and civil society organizations will be employed to build synergistic relations and generalized norms and networks of cooperation; to prevent capture from powerful groups and particularized interests; and to cultivate social responsibility, solidarity, social justice, and equality. Such an analysis could enrich conceptions of the state and democracy discussed by PKI by investigating further the complex interactions among the market, the state, and the civil society, and their impact on economic and political processes and outcomes. Ultimately, it will enable us to discover the transformational and prefigurative relations, which already exist and have the potential to foster alternative rationalities and subjectivities for changing production, public policy, and social welfare.

We live in times in which the civic space has been severely restricted by factors such as the dismantling of the welfare state; the privatization of social provisioning; the dominance of values of efficiency and profit in the private and public sectors; the violations of fundamental rights such as the freedom of association, peaceful assembly, and expression; the withdrawal of countries from international initiatives and treaties for social and environmental protection; and the violence against social groups of different gender, race, religion or ethnicity (CIVICUS 2019). These conditions may shape the interactions among the market, the state, and the civil society, in ways that adversely affect processes of social participation, deliberation, and transformation, and consolidate power structures and inequalities. Of course, new social groups and movements have emerged to respond to these trends and counteract the attack on social justice and equality. The aim is to mobilize and organize social forces that can reflect upon and protect social values of participation, democracy, welfare, equality, and justice *for all*.

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