Social capital: between harmony and dissonance

Jane Franklin

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CONTENTS

Over the last five years, the Families & Social Capital ESRC Research Group has explored the interplay between family change and processes of social capital. Researchers in the group are experienced in researching families, children and young people and intimate lives, bringing sociological, feminist, anthropological and economic expertise to the work. The concept of social capital, however, was relatively new to us, so we set out to be creative in our interpretation of the idea, and reflexive in thinking about its usefulness or heuristic potential in social research (Edwards et al. 2003). We also felt some resistance to the theoretical, political and methodological assumptions that underpin mainstream social capital theory (Portes 1998; Baron 2003; Ponthieux 2004). This presented an uneasy dilemma: how is it possible to work with an idea that runs counter to long established theoretical and methodological perspectives? Why work with this idea given vibrancy of concepts and modes of analysis already available to sociologists and feminist researchers? Perhaps one of the main reasons for addressing social capital is to open up its power and effect in politics to radical critique, and to explore empirically the salience of its ideas. As Anne Kovalainen has pointed out '[S]ocial capital and trust have within a short time become hugely influential, truly global, theoretical concepts in analysis of current social and economic development, change and cohesion in various societies' (2004: 155). In this paper, I focus on mainstream theories of social capital since it is in this context that the idea influences political debate. I explore how social capital emerges as a late modern idea; how it infuses and re-configures academic and political discourses; how it redefines the social and the relationship between individual and society; and how the idea of social capital contributes to the current discourse and politics of community that supports the New Labour paradigm. Finally, I draw from the research of the Families & Social Capital ESRC Group, to illustrate how the empirical social world fails to live up to the 'social capital lost' story peddled in mainstream approaches.

What is this thing called 'social capital'?

Loosely, social capital refers to social connections or networks and the trust and reciprocity that strengthen them (Putnam 2000). Debates about social capital often begin with the assumption that it is a significant social fact that warrants consideration, definition and research. Yet, like all concepts in the social sciences, social capital can only offer a partial understanding of how social relationships and societies work. Concepts tend to offer a model, or an ideal type, which can be helpful in understanding everyday life, but will tend to distance, abstract and generalise, It is only through empirical research that they can be tested and indeed modified to correspond to, and more adequately express the intricacies of social interaction. So in its abstract, perhaps ideological form, social capital can only hope to theorise and offer some explanation of social issues and solutions to what it defines as social problems. Adapting aspects of social capital theory, like trust and reciprocity, into concrete observable categories for research purposes has proved maddeningly difficult (Harper 2001), so that definition has been a major pre-occupation in the literature. Often commitment to working with the concept and unquestioning acceptance of its validity come prior to its definition. As Ben Fine illustrates, social capital is 'acknowledged to be difficult to measure (in a neat inversion of logic, World Bank projects seek to define it by measuring it)' (2001: 12). The reality of social capital is brought into existence through a narrative constructed, defined, used and criticised. Like others, I fall into the trap of discussing what social capital is.

Theoretical debates within the field of social capital tend to take a fairly predicable shape, between the broadly functionalist/consensus approach which draws on the work of James Coleman and Robert Putnam, and the more critical approach of Pierre Bourdieu. As Janet Holland points out, this presents an either/or dynamic in social capital theory between an integration model and a model of injustice and inequality (2007), reflecting the modern sociological dynamic between consensus and

critique. For Coleman, social capital is constituted in the space between social structure and agency, and between and among individuals, so that it 'inheres in the structure of social relationships' (1990: 302). Unlike human capital, the knowledge and skills that reside within individuals, or physical capital, buildings, equipment, transport systems, financial services, social capital is nebulous, has no material existence, and can only be realised in its effects or outcomes (Portes 1998); a quality that adds to its incoherence and the problem of definition.

> Social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity, but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspects of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors – whether persons or corporate actors – within the structure.
> (Coleman 1988: S98; 1990: 302)

While Coleman's work on family and education have been influential in the development of social capital theory, his work has been overshadowed by Robert Putnam (Baron et al. 2000) who moves the emphasis from family to community and from individual to collective social capital (Portes 1998; Lin 2001). It is largely through the work of Putnam (2000) that the idea of social capital has gained influence across a range of different fields, most notably politics and policy making (Baron 2003; Everingham 2003; Gamarnikow and Green 1999). Akin to communitarian approaches (Fraser and Lacey 1993). Putnam sees that societies are made up of families and communities, of networks of friends and colleagues. He stresses the importance of the trust, values and reciprocity that make relationships work and sustain the connections that bind societies together. Social capital in this way fosters social cohesion, a sense of security and belonging, and offers opportunities. The more social capital we have the more we are likely to get involved in local communities, and become economically active and prosperous. To explain different forms of social capital and their impact on individual and social life, Putnam employs the concepts of 'bonding' and 'bridging'. Bonding social capital is based around family, close friends and near kin. It is inward-looking and binds people who are similar. It tends to reinforce exclusive identities and homogenous groups, also referred to as 'getting by' (Lowndes 2004). Bridging social capital exists in some tension with bonding, social capital. It is inclusive and links people to more distant networks tending to generate broader identities and wider reciprocity, and is referred to as 'getting ahead' (Lowndes 2004). The concepts of bonding and bridging capture potential processes of integration within and between communities.

Putnam's account of social capital is implicitly nostalgic, concerned as he is with the decline in social capital in America since the second world war. His 'social capital lost story' tells us that this decline is due to society becoming more individualized, interested in the 'quest for the ideal self'. The 'free-agency' of the 1960s generation, he writes, has had a high social cost, not least the breakdown of traditional family life and the isolation of individuals in society. For Putnam, the low stock of social capital held by communities or nations contributes to economic decline, so that governments need to intervene to build social capital through policies like family and community friendly workplaces, supporting local participation in politics and decision making.

In contrast, a more critical understanding of the concept and role of social capital follows the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1986). He emphasises 'the social construction of the content of social capital' (Fine 2001: 13), and the significance of the social and material contexts in which people generate resources. Since, in his view, access to economic, cultural and social resources or capitals, are constrained and defined by social systems (Edwards et al. 2003), Bourdieu finds that the

relationship between the different forms of capital provides a framework for understanding the 'micro-politics of power' (Skeggs 1997). Since:

> ….the kinds of capital, like the aces in a game of cards, are powers that define the chances of profit in a given field… the structures of the social world are defined at every moment by the structure of the distribution of the capital and profits characteristic of the particular different fields.
> (Bourdieu, quoted in McCall, 1992: 841)

Thus, Bourdieu uses the notion of social capital as a device to allow for a more nuanced or 'theoretically refined' understanding of how structural inequalities are sustained (Portes 1998). In comparison to Putnam's distinction between bonding and bridging social capital, Bourdieu focuses on the strategies individuals employ as they invest in and capitalise on social, economic and cultural resources. Interestingly, his understanding of how economic factors impact on social relationships is reversed in mainstream social capital theory which is oriented towards how social factors impact positively or negatively on economic and political spheres. Though Bourdieu's work has been marginalised by mainstream social capital theory, as somehow missing the point (Fine, 2001), it has been useful to those critical of Putnam, since it constitutes the 'conflict and power side of social capital' (Siisiäinen 2000: 8; Arneil 2007). While Putnam has the ear of politicians in the United States and a range of other nation states including Britain, Bourdieu's approach has had some influence in policy making in Canada (Arneil 2007; Holland 2007). Thus, across different perspectives, theories of social capital have helped to conceptualise the social world as the site of policy intervention.

The 'social turn'

On one level, debates about social capital, as I have argued, reflect the modern sociological interplay between consensus and conflict. On another level, however, social capital theory is characteristically late modern in effecting a 'social turn' (Tonkiss 2000) in social, political and economic debates. I use the term 'late modern' to describe how social capital theory is rooted in the modern or traditional terrain of sociology and politics, yet redefines and captures 'the social' and social action to speak to contemporary political and policy discourses (Franklin and Thomson 2005). It does so in the following way: In conceptualising the social world, social capital theory breaks with tradition by integrating theories and perspectives from political economics and sociology, two previously distinct social science traditions. Kovalainen comments that indeed the inherent appeal of social capital rests on the idea of its being at one and the same time an economic, political and sociological concept, thus having interdisciplinary prominence and potential (2004: 157). We can see this, for example, in the differentiated work of theorists like Coleman, Putnam and Fukuyama, where alliances are forged between economic rational action theory, and theories of social order and civic renewal from functionalist sociology and political theories of civil society (Coleman 1988; Fukuyama 1997; Putnam 2000). Some argue that this capacity of the social capital concept to move in and between disciplines is an advantage (Woolcock 1998, 2001), since it is freed from the constraints of particular disciplinary traditions and perspectives. For others, different frames of references make the concept 'chaotic' (Fine 2001) or 'fuzzy' (Morrow 1999) leading us back to the question of 'what is social capital?' (Portes 1998; Morrow 1999; Harper 2001). Either way, social capital theory works previously distinct perspectives together, in a kind of post or late modern sweep of ideas, to suit its own hybrid construction (Fine 2001). In this process, categories developed to understand or explain social action lose their analytic connection to sociology, for example becoming incorporated into an economic or political science framework,

where they sound the same, but have different meanings and effects. This means that certain tensions and contractions inherent in the relationship between say, sociology, economics and politics are not addressed. For example, common concepts like 'trust' are understood differently across these three disciplines. Social capital theory relies on an everyday understanding of trust which masks the theoretical or political context in which it is shaped, and which in turn has implications for research and policy making. Looking more closely at how the concept of trust is used in different theoretical and political contexts helps to illustrate the discursive mechanisms of the social capital concept.

Trust

Just as social capital contains and softens the tension between oppositional theories and categories, the concept of 'trust' in social capital theory plays a similar role at the level of social interaction. It provides a way of understanding individual agency in relation to social structures (Misztal 1996), by articulating the desired form of behaviour or type of social relationship that 'lubricates' and generates effective communities and networks. Crucially, it provides a framework for understanding how the social order is constructed and maintained through human motivation and action (Lewandowski 2007). The framework of trust in social capital theory links individual/social action and social structure conceptually, by showing how individual choice impacts upon and reflects networks, the social structures of social capital societies. Further, it suggests the preferred outcomes of social action in the form of economic effectiveness and social order. And lastly, in choosing a lexicon of 'trust, norms and reciprocity', it values cooperation and community, mapping the social world as a consensual and ordered space (Baron et al. 2000). Anger, creativity, play, power, exploitation, discrimination, dissent, passion, boredom, commitment, love, betrayal, recognition, hatred and anxiety are strangely absent. In contrast to the possible repertoire of human interaction, social capital motives seem to be largely instrumental, cold and calculating.

In the pattern of mainstream social capital theory, the concept of trust reflects an alliance between communitarian, civil society theories, and particularly rational choice theory, which offers social capital the 'elegance and simplicity of its model of motivation' (Misztal 1996: 77; Arneil 2007). In Coleman's work, for example, we find that the motivation for trust is utility and self interest, and the effect of trust is social cohesion, working in turn in the interests of economic efficiency (Misztal 1996; Siisiäinen 2000; Fine 2001). As the basis for cohesive and reciprocal societies, trust operates in a virtuous circle; it generates reciprocity and voluntary associations, and in turn reciprocity and associations create, strengthen and produce trust (see Putnam 1993:163-185). Trust as social capital grows with use and is essential for building a cohesive, balanced society, rich in levels of cooperation, reciprocity, civic activity and collective well-being (Coleman 1988). Equally, informal trust operating within communities leads to economic growth and is more efficient than the rules and regulations of formal institutions (Fukuyama 1995). A lack of trust, however, has negative potential, creating a vicious circle expressed in society as distrust, breaking of the norms of reciprocity, avoiding one's duties, bringing isolation disorder and stagnation. The result is the development of a non-civic community (Siisiäinen 2000). In short, trust operates in social capital theory, as 'a background to everyday interaction through which the predictability, legibility and reliability of collective order is sustained, while the perception of its complexity and uncertainty is restricted' (Misztal 1996: 97).

Thus as a conceptual link between individuals and networks in 'civil society', trust has a series of functions in social capital theory. It serves to ameliorate the tensions that arise in conditions of social change, particularly that between economy and society, and the politically problematic

growth in material, social and cultural inequalities. It situates the 'economic, rational individual' at the heart of community life, and facilitates theoretical compatibility between the two. Further, the function of trust in social capital theory is to provide the link between individual and collective interests, between the 'rational individual actor' and social, collective needs, linking a common sense understanding of trust, as expressed in social relationships, with a rational instrumental notion of trust, which works to secure certain economic outcomes (Tonkiss 2000). In this view, trust is a capital that can be utilised as a social and economic resource.

To illustrate the narrow definitions of trust found in mainstream social capital theories, it is interesting to compare them with more nuanced and interpretive sociological accounts where trust has been understood, for example, as a dynamic and constantly changing response to insecurity and risk. Anthony Giddens (1991, 1992) has pointed out that the quality of trust changes as societies change. In a similar analysis to Fukuyama (1995), Giddens argues that in pre-modern societies trust is embedded in kinship, community, religion and tradition, while in modern societies people transfer their trust to abstract systems, like the welfare state, to science and to experts. He differs from Fukuyama when he argues that trust is fluid and active, not a capacity that is lost and needs to be taken back or re-instated. Policy makers, he suggests, need to take account of how people are making choices, negotiating the balance in late modern society between trust and risk, rather than working to reinstate norms and values which worked in earlier times (Giddens 1998). For example, once trust in abstract institutions dissipates, the balance between risk and trust is individualised, and people have to make choices for themselves and their families without the assurance of expert knowledge (Coote 1998; Giddens 1998). In this sense trust cannot be taken for granted, and has to be constantly negotiated in an open and democratic process. It is not surprising that trust is a difficult concept to operationalise in empirical research (Misztal 1996).

This brief discussion of trust, illustrates how a concept can be defined narrowly, leaving out much of the complexity of social interactions, without losing its common sense definition. We can agree that trust is significant and contributes to cohesive social relations, and even agree that it can be enhanced and sustained through policy initiatives. As Fran Tonkiss (Franklin 2003) suggests, as an economic concept trust has these functional attributes, but she argues that it is disingenuous to transfer an economic concept into a sociological one, skirting over the empirical complexities of social life that sociologists have been studying and identifying for decades. As a post/late modern, hybrid concept, social capital/trust does not need to pay attention to these complexities; it 'works' pragmatically by defining its own position, taking what it needs from economics and politics and transferring them to the social. In this way, a particular social world comes into focus.

Social capital theory veers towards explanations that point to the social production of economy and polity, so that the social is not viewed as necessarily interesting in itself, but as significant for economic and political ends (Tonkiss 2000; Fine 2001; Portes 1998). Theoretical perspectives which view society as the outcome of rational choice, a political economy template, mask the messiness, unpredictability, conflicts and intricacies of social life which critical sociology can pick up. This mirrors, as Gamarnikow and Green point out (1999), a key shift in understanding of the causal relationship between economy and society in the transition from social to social capital theory. Functionalist sociology, embedded in the modern context, has an integrated understanding of social and economic systems and relations, and the social inequalities they produce; whereas, social capital explanations tend to view society as prior to and causative of the production of the economy. In sidelining economic, material or structural context and effects, Gamarnikow and Green argue, social capital theory takes attention away from the economy to culture and society as the focus of policy intervention (1999). Yet at the same time, the concept itself is largely conceived in economic terms, contributing to a balance sheet approach to social relationships, asking how much

or how little social capital/trust a community may have. Social capital becomes a measure of virtue and, as Savage and Li point out, a means through which economistic assumptions are 'smuggled into the city of the social' (2007).

Reframing the social

Trust is the mechanism that lubricates social relationships and the generation of social capital. In moments of social change and disruption, the function of a concept like social capital is to reconstitute the common sense way we think about society, so as to emphasise cohesion and downplay conflict. In social capital theory the social is made up of individuals and communities, rather than social groups like class, race and gender. By refocusing on the social, rather than the economic or political spheres, the economy is not the cause of social inequalities as in traditional social democratic perspectives. The individual in her/his community becomes responsible for their own inequalities.

Consequently, social capital theory changes our common sense understanding of how societies are structured. Traditionally, we think of society as a hierarchy of class, gender and ethnicity. Mapped onto this understanding, we think of the impact of markets and consumerism, offering choices and social mobility to individuals. Both these implicate the economy. The first, social democratic framework is based on an understanding of the material and cultural basis of inequalities. The second, market model suggests the social implications of market freedoms for social structures. In theories of social capital, structural inequalities are replaced by a series of communities, where individuals generate community life through reciprocal interactions. This has economic effect, rather than the other way round. In this horizontal system, inequalities are seen to flow in and out of a cross-section of interconnecting networks. Individuals can access opportunities through network connections, increasing their potential for social mobility and for moving out of disadvantaged positions. Thus, the discourse of social capital embeds a horizontal understanding of the relationship between structure and agency that dismisses vertical inequalities without any argument or rationale as to why they are being ignored. Inequalities, socially rather than economically or culturally produced, legitimise policy making that focuses on social behaviour (Coleman 1988; Putnam 2001; Wright et al. 1999) rather than, as Bourdieu would argue, the social and cultural positions into which people are born that largely determine their access to capital resources (1986). This re-configuration of the social in mainstream social capital theory thus claims a knowledge of the social through categories and debates current in economics and political science. As sociologists work out what they think about the social in late modernity (Marshall and Witz 2004; Adkins 2002, 2004, 2005; Franklin and Thomson 2005; Misztal 2005) a space opens up for a colonisation of society by political science and economics towards a neo-functionalist version of the social world which seems to be quietly deconstructing the authority of sociology (Portes 1996).

Imagining the social as community

I have discussed how social capital theory lays claim to the social world through an economic and political rationale. In so doing, social capital theory embeds a new image of the social as a series of communities rather than a framework of social identities and structural inequalities. The idea of community evokes the promise of tradition, safety and security in a troubled world: a nostalgia for something lost or located in the past (Adkins 2004). Community is the longed for 'other' to the individualisation of modern societies, emphasising the ways that people co-operate and reciprocate

and have responsibility for each other rather than claims for social recognition and individual rights. Amitai Etzioni describes the structures of the communitarian community:

> Community is defined by two characteristics: first a web of affect laden relationships among a group of individuals, relationships that often criss-cross and reinforce one another…. and second, a measure of commitment to a set of shared values, norms and meanings, and a shared history and identity – in short to a particular culture.
> (Etzioni 1995: 127)

Like Putnam, Etzioni mourns the erosion of social norms and values in contemporary societies. Both point to the detrimental effect of welfare states on individual responsibility and berate the new right emphasis on individual rights over social solidarity, thus providing a theoretical support to the third way paradigm. The popular front of assumptions and ideas that frame the discourse of community, Nikolas Rose argues, redefines the social world, replacing the old notion of 'society'. The discourse of community describes a space of interaction based on neighbourhoods and networks within which people's lives can be contained and structured. In communities, we now understand ourselves to be, not members of social classes, but of networks, and relationships of trust. In this way, citizens can be 'governed through community' (Rose 1999; Adkins 2002). Rose quotes Etzioni, who says that community is 'a space of emotional relationships through which individual identities are constructed through their bonds to micro-cultures of meaning and value' (Rose 1999: 476). Individual subjects are redefined by reference to life politics, an individualised responsibility for health, wealth and welfare. What Rose refers to as 'the politics of life itself' replaces the politics of emancipation and social justice (2001). For Rose, discourses of community and risk work in the strategic, economic interests of government. The language of community, of obligation, morals and responsibilities, he suggests, provides an ethical framework for governing individual behaviour in the construction of an ethical and ordered citizenry (Rose 2001).

Working with the idea of community takes attention away from social structure as the manifestation of inequality and towards individual agency. Society is seen to be made up of a diversity of communities rather than social classes. Within communities, individuals are defined and access resources through the connections they make with each other. Different 'communities' may not be geographically placed, but are defined in relation to the identities of the individuals that 'make them up'. So, we imagine cultural communities, working class communities, artistic communities, local communities, Muslim communities, virtual communities, gay communities, black communities, divided communities. In keeping with the social capital perspective on the social and on individual behaviour, a politics which defines the social as community is able to highlight and focus on the behaviour of particular social groups. For example, Muslim communities have recently been 'advised' by politicians to put their house in order and identify fundamentalist views and behaviour in their young people. The problem of terrorism is a 'problem for the Muslim community'. Families and communities are seen to be responsible for nurturing and harbouring terrorists. Significantly, this takes attention away from the poverty, alienation and lack of material resources that may also influence the ways young people see themselves in the world. As Rose has pointed out, increasingly we are governed through community '.on the one hand, community is a kind of natural extra-political zone of human relations, on the other, a crucial element in styles of political government' (1999: 167). In thinking about society as broken up into different communities, and in focusing in on the relationships and networks within those communities, judging them in relation to their stock of social capital, we fail to see the layering, complexity and impact of wider social forces. Within the idealised 'social capital community', Barbara Arneil argues, 'multiculturalism and diversity… are always "challenges" to be managed, overcome and transcended in the search for a

common centre that will yield both the necessary lubrication for co-operation and glue to unite all' (Arneil 2007: 34).

The abstract or 'idealised' quality of community in communitarian and social capital theories, masks the everyday experience of living in contemporary societies. A notion of how communities should be fixes rather than opens up the possibility of identifying how people actually live their lives and how other forces impact on the choices they are able to make. The appeal of 'community' in social capital theory is that it resonates with a deep desire for a lost world. Though we may desire community as an ideal place to live, paradoxically, as Bauman suggests, our longing for security, trust and reciprocity individualises and separates people from each other:

> If they fall ill, it is because they are not resolute or industrious enough in following the health regime. If they stay unemployed it is because they failed to learn the skills of winning an interview or because they did not try hard enough to find a job or because they are purely and simply work-shy.
> (Bauman 2001: 47)

In contrast to an idealised notion of community, which works, as Bauman argues, in antithesis to the phantasy, Christine Everingham suggests that we might look at the kinds of communities in which people actually live (2003: 7). She proposes, as does Arneil (2007), bringing conflict and political contestation into the picture; to see communities as 'dynamic and constantly contested', as not fixed but lived and so continuous and stable, and fracturing and changing at the same time (Rose 1999). No two communities are the same and communities take shape as much through protest, resistance and conflict as through the sharing of common goals and values (Morris 1996). Discourses of social capital and community, with their uncritical qualities and desires for cohesion are unable to articulate difference, change, dissent and passion in social life.

To capture the diverse qualities of human interaction largely absent in social capital theory, Joseph Lewandowski explores the notion of 'sociability' in preference to social capital (2007). 'Sociability', following Georg Simmel (1949), sidesteps both the rational action, capitalizing account of social capital theory, as well as Bourdieu's structural analysis (Lewandowski 2007: 25). The potential of sociability, Lewandowski argues, lies in shifting our gaze from the reductive economic or political effects of interaction, towards the aesthetic and creative energy released in human association: 'the transcendent social norm of cooperation is immanent in the very aesthetic of sociability itself' (2007: 24). Similarly, Bauman's notion of 'sociality' offers a more fluid account of how individuals interact with each other: 'the dialectical play of randomness and pattern...which treats instead all found structures as emergent accomplishments' (1992: 190). Bauman searches for a politics that chimes with new and emerging forms of solidarity and difference in a world where we are increasingly becoming strangers to each other. Both argue that we are more likely to understand old and new forms of inequality and the exercise of power through alternative approaches to social capital. Those who follow the social capital path; those following Bourdieu who mourn the loss of structural analysis in social capital; and sociologists like Anthony Giddens (1999) who argue that structural inequalities are dissolving all, as Scott Lash (1994) and Lisa Adkins (2002) argue, fail to recognise new forms of inequality as they emerge:

> ...in the shift from the manufacturing to informational production a new class is created which is structurally downwardly mobile from the working class. In terms of relations to the information and communication structures …. this underclass includes the 'ghetto poor', but also includes much of the information society's 'excluded third'.
> (Lash 1994: 130)

The image of the social in social capital theory, not only sidelines structural inequalities as they emerge but is productive, creating new forms of social domination precisely through the linguistic framework of community and networks (Adkins 1998: 47). As Adkins suggests, we need to be alert to the 'reconfigurations' of class and gender, recognising links between new kinds of economic insecurity and a range of structural inequalities (Adkins 2004, 2005).

Politics of social capital

Social capital occupies and alters the terrain of political discourse, representing 'an important shift in focus away from either the state or citizen to the civic space in between. In this regard, the social capital thesis parallels two influential schools of thought within contemporary liberal democratic theory, namely communitarianism and third way theory (Arneil 2007: 30). Social capital and communitarian theories have contributed to a redefinition of social democracy that is central to the third way paradigm (Franklin 2000). Post war social democracy recognised the role of the capitalist economy in producing social inequalities, and assumed a divergence of social and economic interests. The new social democracy, advocated by New Labour, assumes a co-incidence of needs and a partnership between economy and society with the view that a strong, globalising economy needs a flexible workforce and a stable social order. This co-operative synthesis gives shape to New Labour's political paradigm which is supposedly located beyond the oppositional politics of left and right, where social and economic interests were often in conflict, towards a consensus politics that emphasises partnership. In this twist, political debate shifts from earlier political concerns with inequality and redistribution, to a pre-occupation with cohesion, safety and security. The link between social justice and inequality is fractured, and social capital begins to take precedence (Everingham 2003). Though class, gender and ethnicity continue to structure and constrain social life (Adkins 2002; Skeggs 1997), political focus is more on family, community and individual responsibility.

I have argued that a surface reading of mainstream social capital theory provides a common sense understanding of how society works, which can to some sound progressive. However, the politics of social capital and community provides a template of the social world that hides certain aspects of social change and conflictual relationships between the social, political and economic. This political template has aided the shift from a left/right political paradigm, to one that valorises security and tradition in the face of an increasing sense of risk and insecurity (Beck 1992). Even so, social capital is not the only idea contributing to this new 'conceptual' politics that draws on abstract ideas to construct a particular view of the social world. Like social capital and community, ideas of 'happiness' (Layard 2005) and of 'well-being' (Sointu 2005) have recently entered the political lexicon, as armoury for tradition and against insecurity, in effect creating a politics of lack and desire. The ideal quality of these concepts separates them from the context of people's lives. Again, common sense tells us that happiness and well being are important, at the same time, they are politically empty, empty of meaning until each of us, as consumers of happiness and well-being can fill the empty space with whatever we desire. So social capital is one, particularly successful, idea in a line of different conceptual categories explored by social scientists and taken to be useful by policy makers and politicians, pointing less to redistribution or recognition of identity and more to a pigeon-holing of the human condition in relation to an increasingly fearful environment.

Working with the concept of social capital

Placing the idea of social capital in theoretical and political context raises issues relating to the use of its concepts and categories in policy and research. I have shown how social capital resonates, and has emerged in parallel with current political paradigms and so cannot be presumed to be neutral, hiding as it does a confusion of moral and economic assumptions. Different ways of working with the concept tend to be split between those who work with or within the idea, critically or uncritically, accepting or adapting its premises; and those who cannot understand why the concept is necessary but are interested in why it is being used, engaging with the idea to illustrate its discursive and powerful impact (Adkins 2005; Misztal 2005). These positions are reflected in the different feminist approaches to the concept. Some feminists for example broadly accept social capital as providing a useful insight into understanding women's lives, in its regard for informal political creativity and affective relationships. They work with the idea whilst recognising and correcting its universal quality and gender bias (Lowndes 2004, 2006; Kovalainen 2004), asking '(w)hat can a gendered analysis tell us about social capital and what can social capital theory tell us about gender and politics?' (Gidengill and O'Neill 2006: 2). Others have been critical of the theoretical and political assumptions that infuse the social capital concept and have drawn on feminist interpretations of Bourdieu to enhance their critique (Arneil 2006, 2007; Bruegel 2005; Gillies 2004). Other feminists have opened the concept up to a different kind of critique, as in the work of Lisa Adkins who concludes that feminists should be wary of using the concept at all. She argues that feminist critiques of social capital have been trapped within a 'correctionist model of thinking', reproducing a romanticised idea of women as the creators of collective social goods (Adkins 2005).

I think it is fair to say that the researchers in the Families & Social Capital ESRC Research Group have developed different interpretations of the concept of social capital that more or less reflect these positions[1]. Overall, we interpret social capital to mean 'the values that people hold and the resources that they can access, which both result in and are the result of collective and socially negotiated ties and relationships' (Edwards et al. 2003:2). Drawing on the work of Bourdieu and a range of social science perspectives, our research has revealed the complex and multiple ways people rely on and trust each other; how class and gender still have a crucial impact on the capacity of individuals to create and access resources; and how families support and maintain relationships and interdependence across generations and global reaches. Perhaps above all, contrary to the social capital lost story, we have found a wealth of social capital as we define it in the families and communities we researched.

A critical understanding of social life, which draws on Bourdieu and other sociological perspectives, brings social, economic and cultural contingencies back into the picture of the social world painted by Putnam. The idea of social capital, Irene Bruegel argues, can just as easily illuminate relations of power as it can point to the degree of homogeneity and heterogeneity of the groups themselves (2005). With this in mind, the distinction between bonding and bridging social capital must to a degree be both overlaid and challenged in relation to gender, class and ethnicity. To recap, for Putnam bonding social capital between family, close friends and near kin tends to reinforce exclusive identities and homogenous groups; and bridging social capital is inclusive and links people to more distant networks. Our research suggests some evidence of this, but paints a more nuanced picture. With a focus on parenting, Ros Edwards and Val Gillies (2005) show how social divisions of class and gender are maintained through processes of bonding and bridging social capital. They found that working class families did tend to live close to family and friends and to rely

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[1] For information about the Families & Social Capital ESRC Research Group see
http://www.lsbu.ac.uk/families

on them for practical and emotional support, while middle class families were more likely to live away from close family and to connect in to support networks that confirmed and accumulated social advantage. Bonding social capital can give working class parents the advantage of unconditional family support, but is less likely to offer wider social and economic benefits. Middle class parents may have a more individualised experience, getting involved in more risky or contingent social networks which bring potential access to valuable bridging social capital. With these practices, class location and social division is, as Bourdieu suggests, confirmed and more or less maintained.

While working class social capital can be predictably bonding, and middle class social capital is more likely to encourage bridging, there are other social forces at work which make this distinction multidimensional and complex. In her work with young people and their transitions to adulthood Janet Holland and her colleagues find that young people from middle class backgrounds tended to be well networked through families and friends, and also well resourced (2007). Working class young people could also be well networked, though their connections tended to be around family and local community, in contrast to the 'broader opportunities for contacts, education and work' that middle class networks can provide (2007: 170). In contrast, Holland writes that some young people struggled to disengage from their working class roots to pursue education as a way to get out and get on; and comfortable middle class young people were content to 'get by' in their relatively privileged positions (2007). In some instances the security, recognition and strong sense of self derived from family and community give young people the confidence and agency to move out and move on:

> We have … found an association between social class location and social capital, although it is complex and variable….we have also found networks of support and social capital that enhance and facilitate the young people's lives in the community, and can offer potential links out of the community, calling therefore for a far more nuanced understanding of bonding and bridging social capital and the relationship between community, society and polity.
> (Holland 2007: 176)

By sidelining class and gender, social capital theory provides a template for understanding the social world that fails to recognise the diversity of practices through which persistent inequalities are sustained and challenged. The gender bias of social capital theory (Molyneux 2002) hides the social mechanisms through which gender roles are produced and maintained. Perhaps predictably, Edwards and Gillies find that it is predominantly mothers who work to access, create and maintain informal social networks, whether of family, friends or work colleagues, that provide emotional and practical support in parenting. Fathers tended to be distanced from these informal connections and to be less likely to access support for day to day childcare (Edwards and Gillies 2005). These caring networks sustain families of all kinds and underpin social cohesion. Yet they are largely taken for granted or seen to be in decline by mainstream social capital perspectives that are insensitive to gender. Social capital theory renders women's caring networks invisible, by ignoring gender and at the same time, places women un-problematically at the centre of family and community life (Franklin and Thomson 2005). In contrast, Edwards and Gillies recognise women's role in establishing enduring networks of care and the inequalities sustained through gendered processes of social capital (2005).

In a similar way, the 'social capital lost' story is challenged by Kanwal Mand who questions the assumption in mainstream approaches to social capital that migration and the break up of traditional communities leads to a decline in social capital (Mand 2006: 2). Studies show, Mand

suggests, that 'migrant networks' develop creative and innovative practices which sustain them through processes of change and disruption (2006). Relationships are also developed and sustained across transnational boundaries, as Tracey Reynolds and Elisabetta Zontini (2007) find in their research. Enduring networks of care between mothers, grandmothers, children and siblings, take advantage of new forms of communication and accessible air travel, and belie the 'a-historic, static and locality based notions of social capital' (2007: 233) Through their research, Reynolds and Zontini show that working within the confines of social capital theory, these global caring networks remain invisible, and the rich 'resources circulating amongst ethnic minorities in the UK and abroad' (2007: 233) are unacknowledged in policy discourses. Policies devised to enhance social cohesion and strengthen families and communities which continue to assume the validity of the social capital lost story, work against the grain of everyday life and experience. Critical methodologies and empirical research disrupt the social capital template to reveal a vibrancy and diversity of social interactions, values and connections between people. Significantly, we have shown how these continue to be shaped by social divisions of gender, class and race/ethnicity in ways that perpetuate marginalisation and inequality.

Conclusion

The discourse of social capital disturbs the terrain of discrete academic disciplines, and perhaps for this reason might be celebrated. However, it has a strange disorienting effect for critical sociologists and feminists: a switchback to the 1950s prior to the contribution of feminist theory and practice since the 1970s and forward to a post modern rejection of structural inequalities and liberal values. What social capital offers instead is a hybrid nostalgia for tradition, cohesion and stability of the mid 20th century, a model of the social world that is universal and fragmented at the same time. Ideologically universalising the values and aspirations of middle America (Arneil 2007), and fragmenting since it breaks society down into communities, and gives individuals responsibility for their own inequalities. Working with the concept of social capital demands an acknowledgement of three key effects: first, that it reconfigures the social in such a way as to favour economic and political interests, even though it appears to be putting the social centre stage; second, it amalgamates oppositional categories and theories, undermining or sidelining conflicts and contradictions that persist and frame late modern societies, and third, mainstream theories of social capital unravel and simplify complex and multi-layered sociological understandings of social interaction and inequality. As Portes argues (1998), it is the role of sociologists to continually question the 'allegiances and associations' that underlie social capital theories (Portes 1998).

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