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Social Capital and Civil Society – Exploring a Complex Relationship

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Abstract

Understandings of the relationship between social capital and civil society depend on which traditions of research scholars take as their point of reference. This paper identifies three such general families: social capital as accessed resources, as cognitive resources, or as networks and the norms embedded in them. It is argued that the latter perspective is the most promising approach in so far as it enables the exploration of the roots and conditions for collective action at a variety of levels, whilst at the same time avoiding some of the normative assumptions that have drawn criticism to the social capital approach. Finally this paper suggests that such an understanding of social capital is compatible with recent theoretical advances in the field of social movement theory and theory of associations, which can be seen as two of the forms of collective action which social capital can facilitate.

Introduction

This paper must carry a warning right at the start: it is not intended as the presentation of a finished and polished understanding of social capital in relation to civil society. Rather it aims to be an exploratory incursion into certain ways of understanding this relationship and on how to make use of recent theoretical constructs in order to do so. In particular, it aims to generate discussion on how social capital should be defined as its conceptualisation and practice crystallises in a number of distinct ‘schools’.

Civil society and its role in sustaining democratic governance is, just as social capital, a highly contentious subject, where a number of different understandings present competing accounts of the sources of civil society and how it relates to state and market. Understandings of civil society draw on such disparate traditions as the moral economy of Locke and Adam Smith, the writings of Gramsci, and the philosophy of Hegel¹. There is a common thread running between these traditions which sees civil society as an entity somewhat autonomous from the state - and for some from the market - that can act in complementarity or even in opposition to these entities. However wide ranging differences of opinion and interpretation have meant that civil society has come to be defined mostly negatively, by that which is not the state or the market, and, as such, it is often seen as a vague and unwieldy analytical concept.

Nevertheless the term Civil Society is at its most constructive when it is used to describe not a static entity, but a collection of groups constantly in negotiation, conflict or alliance between each other, the state and the market, in ways that affect both collective and individual outcomes. What makes these groups dynamic is the fact that they are the result of the coordinated actions of individuals equally engaged in processes of negotiation, conflict or alliance with each other and in relation to institutions.

¹ Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil society and political theory*, Studies in contemporary German social thought (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1992); *Civil society: history and possibilities*, ed. by Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

If we follow this understanding, discussions regarding the aggregate characteristics (strength, activity, etc.) of civil society are necessarily linked to the collective activities of citizens and/or subjects: the strength of civil society is dependent on the capacity of individuals that compose the polity to act collectively to further their interests. This is not to say, however, that this capacity is distributed equally or that it is evenly activated. How the distribution and differential activation of this capacity affect the quality and strength of civil society is an empirical question of the utmost interest.

This paper will argue that this capacity is best understood and analysed in the light of social capital theory. The proposition it aims to put forward is that: *social capital can potentially be activated into forms of collective action that occur in the sphere of civil society, and constitute its dynamic element*. The irony that a hotly contested and ill-defined concept is being used to shore up an equally slippery term such as civil society is not lost here. Nonetheless, it will be the contention of this paper that a tighter, more precise, definition of social capital can be of use exactly because it makes it possible to be precise as to the mechanisms through which it produces outcomes that matter for civil society.

In this paper, I begin by briefly identifying three major ‘families’ of social capital research according to how they define it, and how they operationalise the relationship of this concept with that of civil society. I will suggest that focusing on networks, and the norms embedded in them, as capacitors of collective action may be the most fruitful way of conceptualizing social capital. In turn, I will argue that the impact of social capital on civil society is always mediated by action and context, and attempt to connect such an understanding to recently formulated theories in the field of social movements and associations, that is to theories that focus on collective actions and their impact on civil society and other entities. Finally, I will close with a brief reflection on how I envisage such a conceptualisation fitting with the wider theme of a changing civil society.

The Social Capital Schools & Civil Society

In the literature, three main ‘families’ of social capital research are identifiable. They all share the concern with the effects of social relationships highlighted by Bourdieu, developed by Coleman and extensively used by Putnam². However, they have very different claims as to what social capital is and does. One sees social capital as *socially accessed resources*; the other two, as Inkeles pointed out, tend to see social capital not so much as a resource that provides individuals with a competitive advantage, but rather as one that provides them with added value by constituting a capacity for collective action³. Although related in their concern for collective action, and the relationship between social capital and civil society, these last two perspectives differ as to what social capital is and what its sources are: one emphasises structural elements, especially networks (henceforth the *networks of collective action* approach), whilst the other sees social capital as being constituted particularly by cultural features of nations or dispositions of individuals, such as interpersonal or social trust (a *cognitive features* approach). These distinctions are meant to be synthetic and much of the work being done on social capital in the last decade can be said to straddle at least two of these families of research. This is especially true of the last two families of research, as many researchers have opted to conceptualise social capital as being composed of both structural and cognitive elements, including Putnam himself, amongst many others. It is nevertheless important to distinguish them and their claims if we are to be able to operationalise social capital and hope for some conceptual clarity in the field.

Social capital as socially accessed resources

An important distinction must be drawn between social capital research that sees it as resources that are accessed through social networks, and that which sees social capital as

² Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital', in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. by J. G. Richardson (Connecticut: 1985); J. Coleman, 'Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital', *American Journal of Sociology*, 94 (1988), S95-S120; James S. Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990); Robert D. Putnam, Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Nanetti, *Making democracy work : civic traditions in modern Italy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).

³ A. Inkeles, 'Measuring social capital and its consequences', *Policy Sciences*, 33 (2000), 245-68

a resource in itself, capable of creating goods by and of itself. The literature that sees social capital as resources accessed or mobilised by virtue of membership of a social network is, even when it does not explicitly acknowledge it, working on an understanding of social capital first developed by Pierre Bourdieu. For this author, social capital played a subsidiary role to physical and cultural capital: individuals use their networks to mobilise ‘collectively owned’ goods. A similar approach has been taken by many sociologists working on social capital, especially those with a background in network theory, such as Nan Lin and Ronald Burt. This tradition of research should be seen as analytically and conceptually separate from those that see social capital as a productive resource in itself⁴. There has been a great deal of research stemming from network theory and economic sociologists that has taken this view of social capital and applied it with great success to a variety of fields⁵.

In this conception of social capital, while there is an element of reciprocity involved, social capital becomes essentially an individual rather than a collective resource. Neither

⁴ Lin distinguishes approaches to social capital according to the level at which they seek their operations. While he sees ‘collectivists’ such as Coleman and Putnam as seeking to explore social capital as a collective asset that enhances group members’ life-chances, Lin follows Bourdieu in exploring social capital at the individual level, and as such sees it as ‘*investment in social relations by individuals through which they gain access to embedded resources to enhance expected returns of instrumental or expressive actions*’. The nature of social capital as socially accessed resources is very clear in Lin: ‘*social capital is seen as a social asset by virtue of actors’ connections and access to resources in the network or group of which they are members*’: Nan Lin, *Social capital : a theory of social structure and action*, Structural analysis in the social sciences ; 19 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Seen in this way, it is clear how such a conceptualization is fundamentally different from other understandings of social capital, a distinction elegantly put by Szreter and Woolcock: ‘...the “mainstream” social capital literature, represented pragmatically by the work of Putnam, regards social capital as the “wires” while network theorists regard it as the “electricity”’: Simon Szreter and Michael Woolcock, ‘Health by Association? Social Capital, Social Theory and the Political Economy of Public Health’, *von Hügél Institute Working Paper Series*, (2002).

⁵ One of the most prominent areas of research has been the role of networks in mobilizing resources for immigrants arriving in host societies, in helping people ‘get by’ in situations of scarcity, or generally mobilizing social support, see amongst others: Hendrik Derk Flap and Beate Völker, *Creation and returns of social capital : a new research program*, edited by Henk Flap and Beate Völker. Papers presented at a conference of international scholars in Amsterdam, held in 1999, and organized around the research of the SCALE research program supported by a grant from NWO [Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek], project number 510-05-0200. (New York: Routledge, 2003); A. Portes, ‘Social Capital: its origins and applications in modern sociology’, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24 (1998), 1-24; Richard Rose, ‘Getting Things Done in an Anti-Modern Society: Social Capital Networks in Russia’, in *Social Capital: A Multifaceted Perspective*, ed. by Partha Dasgupta and Ismail Serageldin (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 1999); Min Zhou, ‘Segmented Assimilation: Issues, Controversies, and Recent Research on the New Second Generation’, *International Migration Review*, 31 (1997), 975-1008

is it a public good *strictu sensu*, but rather something which may have outcomes that are in turn a public good: the fact that an individual may be able to call on the support of friends and neighbours when ill is not in itself of any benefit to society as a whole, it only is so if it can reduce pressure on the social services, or help that individual return more quickly to work. The positive externalities of social capital thus understood are (a) incidental to the use of social capital (no one calls on friends to help find a job because of a higher regard for the country's jobless numbers and the state of the treasury's finances); and (b) highly dependent on the action undertaken, as we can easily imagine how it can be used to 'privatize' public resources, for instance in using connections to corrupt a system of public appointments.

None of what is written above is meant to indicate that socially accessed resources are not social capital, or that their limited public good characteristics make them less 'social' than other understandings. There is a rich body of literature that deals with these phenomena, often without, but increasingly resorting to, the language of social capital⁶. In many ways it is immaterial if this, or other approaches, are called social capital since they have produced many valid and interesting results that emphasise the value of social relations in people lives. It is this intuition - that social relations matter - which unites the families of social capital research, and that the language of social capital has managed to translate to a variety of academic disciplines often hermetically separated from each other. Nevertheless, it is crucial to distinguish the claims made by literature in this camp from those in others since they are identifying very different processes and outcomes, especially in relation wider entities such as civil society or the democratic state.

Social capital as cognitive resources

The connection between networks of personal relations and wider benefits for society in general through the medium of cognitive attributes of individuals or societies such as trust is by no means a new one and can be traced back to the political economists of the eighteenth century. Theorists such as Locke and Adam Smith saw 'civil society' as one

⁶ Cf. I. Kawachi and L. F. Berkman, 'Social ties and mental health', *Journal of Urban Health-Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine*, 78 (2001), 458-67; Szreter and Woolcock, 'Health by Association',

mediated by trust unintentionally created by natural social relations⁷ - trust was for these thinkers a product of social relations. Tocqueville, on the other hand, saw trust as a precondition for the creation of social relations conducive to democracy through associations. In turn, Tocqueville saw this basic attitude of trust as originating from the well exercised role of the state as guarantor of trust between its citizens - through the laws and its execution – and on a cultural patrimony shared by the citizenry, a patrimony composed of the twin dispositions of patriotism and religious belief⁸.

In one of the foundational works in the field of social capital - *Making Democracy Work* - Putnam develops Coleman's notion of social capital as a public good by drawing on these traditions of political philosophy⁹. The concept of trust first appears in Putnam's concept of social capital at the micro level, as an element that facilitates cooperation between individuals engaged in networks, and that is produced by such relationships between the parties involved. However, following Smith, Locke and Tocqueville, Putnam argues that social dilemmas in complex settings (such as the Italian regions) need individuals to trust others with whom they have no direct relationship, and for that they need a more impersonal kind of trust. Putnam's claim in *Making Democracy Work* is that participation in horizontal networks of civic engagement not only foster norms of reciprocity that individuals, by internalizing them, apply in new social exchanges, but individuals embeddedness in social networks also have a range of incentives to be trustworthy. In the face of such social structures and the prevalence of such norms, it is easier to trust strangers and social trust is more likely to be a feature of society: '*norms of generalized reciprocity and networks of civic engagement encourage social trust and cooperation because they reduce incentives to defect, reduce uncertainty and provide models for future cooperation*¹⁰'. Later, in his book *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam slightly revised the role of social trust as an element of social capital, shifting the emphasis from the

⁷ Sunil Khilnani, 'The Development of Civil Society', in *Civil Society: History and Possibilities*, ed. by Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁸ Gianfranco Poggi, *Images of society : essays on the sociological theories of Tocqueville, Marx, and Durkheim*, 24 cm. (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1972).

⁹ Putnam, Leonardi and Nanetti, *Making Democracy Work*.

¹⁰ Ibid. PAGE CIT

creation of the disposition of trust to the disposition of trustworthiness¹¹. Nevertheless there has been an explosion of work that takes social trust - and other cognitive elements - to be synonymous with social capital. Its' claims are briefly reviewed below.

That social capital might be primarily a cultural trait that facilitates collective action - making networks not a part of social capital, but a product of it - is a view that has been primarily championed by Francis Fukuyama. This author draws extensively on Max Weber to argue that '*social capital is an instantiated informal norm that promotes co-operation between individuals. [And can range from] (...) a norm of reciprocity between two friends all the way up to complex and elaborate doctrines like Christianity or Confucianism*¹²'. Being the product of long and drawn-out historical processes, these norms are resistant to change and, according to Fukuyama, are the reasons why some countries can achieve the cooperation necessary to establish liberal democracies and market economies; whilst others cannot.

Knack and Keefer have also argued that social capital, defined as a resource that facilitates economic and political cooperation, should be identified with trust and norms of civic cooperation, rather than any structural elements such as networks. Knack and Keefer undertook an international comparative analysis using economic growth as the dependent variable and a social capital index composed of countries' aggregated responses to the General Social Survey question on social trust, and to five questions designed to test the extent to which individuals had internalised civic norms, such as whether they would cheat on taxes, given the chance. Running regression analysis with a variety of other data, Knack and Keefer arrived at the conclusion that economic growth is affected by trust and civic norms, but not by the existence of horizontal networks¹³.

Fukuyama's and Knack and Keefer's are those views on social capital that most explicitly reject the input of networks into the possibility of engaging in mutually

¹¹ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of the American Community* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2000): p.177

¹² F. Fukuyama, 'Social capital, civil society and development', *Third World Quarterly*, 22 (2001), 7-20: p.7

¹³ S. Knack and P. Keefer, 'Does social capital have an economic payoff?: a cross-country investigation.' *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 112 (1997), 1251-88

beneficial collective action, but by no means are they the only ones focusing on non-structural elements of social capital such as social trust or generalised norms of reciprocity. Eric Uslaner has turned Putnam's argument on its head and argued that social trust, a quality of societies rooted in their cultural heritage and their degree of economic equality over a long period of time, is what explains different levels of membership in voluntary associations, and should as such be seen as the key element of social capital¹⁴. Many others have operationalised social capital by measuring social trust as either a key element of social capital or as an indicator of it (FTN).

However, the rise of social trust to the predominant element of social capital has caused a great deal of debate relating to what social capital is and what it does. Starting from Putnam's conception of social capital as networks, norms and trust, it has been difficult to disentangle whether social trust should be seen as a part of social capital, a product of social capital or social capital itself. There are several ways in which the relationships proposed between social capital and social trust can be criticised and I believe each of these is a good reason why a brittle and parsimonious definition of social capital can and should do without including social trust as a constituent part of the concept. These arguments relate to whether (a) as a concept social capital can withstand being an amalgamation of features of various levels of society, without specifying the relationship between each; (b) whether social trust is a necessary precondition for cooperation; (c) whether social trust is a product of social capital at all; and (d), whether social trust, as it is currently operationalised, stands up to scrutiny.

While it is unquestionable a definition of social capital at any level has take trust into account, understanding social trust as an element of social capital causes difficult problems by confusing different levels of analysis. While it is clear that individuals have networks, accept norms of reciprocity and may even trust others, social trust is an aggregation of individual dispositions (a given percentage of a population may be said to generally trust strangers), But in order for social trust to truly facilitate collective action,

¹⁴ Eric Uslaner, 'Volunteering and Social Capital: how trust and religion shape civic participation in the United States', in *Social Capital and Participation in Everyday Life*, ed. by P. Dekker and Eric Uslaner (London: Routledge, 2001).

it must be a defining feature of the group rather than the individual. To clarify, social trust is only functional for cooperation if a sufficient number of people in a community share a similar attitude: it does not matter if one or two individuals trust most others if the majority of the population does not. As such, trust as a societal or group attribute can be completely separate from the other elements of social capital that are observed and occur at the individual level and it might be unproductive to try and group them together.

Nevertheless, having argued that social trust should not be considered as an element of social capital at the level of individuals and their networks, it is possible that social trust may be useful if we are talking only about aggregated social capital, but even that may be a claim too far, if we find it impossible to relate it coherently to other elements of social capital.

Those who see trust as an important part of social capital often give it causal predominance over actual cooperation. The question put forward is: how can cooperation start without some degree of trust between parties that have no previous relation to each other?¹⁵ However, work such as that by Partha Dasgupta has highlighted the fact that confidence in the outcome of a cooperative act may rest in the hands of a third party (such as the state), and in such circumstances no prior condition of trust is necessary between the cooperators¹⁶. Some proponents of the social trust as social capital position go as far as to argue that cooperative networks need not be a part of the definition of social capital since they were at best an intervening variable on the way to outcomes produced by the existence of trust in society. But if cooperation can be proven to have sources other than trust, then the latter loses some of its explanatory power and the social capital literature must look elsewhere to complement its understanding of collective action.

¹⁵ Eric M. Uslaner, *The Moral Foundations of Trust* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), Chapter 4.

¹⁶ Partha Dasgupta, 'Economic Progress and the Idea of Social Capital', in *Social Capital: A Multifaceted Perspective*, ed. by Partha Dasgupta and Ismail Serageldin (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 1999).

Other arguments, including the Putnam thesis, see social capital and social trust as elements locked in virtuous or vicious circles. Putnam has claimed that membership in horizontal networks is capable (under certain circumstances) of instilling in individuals trust dispositions towards others in society not necessarily involved in the same networks. This social trust, and norms of generalised reciprocity in turn make the creation of new crosscutting horizontal networks easier, thus creating a virtuous circle of social capital and trust. Conversely the breakdown of networks depletes stocks of social trust and makes collective action in such atomised societies increasingly difficult, with all the negative consequences derived from that. However, empirical confirmation of such a claim has been difficult to find. Using experimental methods, Glaeser and his colleagues found little evidence of trust embedded in networks being ‘scaled-up’ to social trust; in a comparative survey of association members, Stolle also found little evidence of membership being strongly related to social trust, as opposed to the usual variables of income, age, education and personal experience¹⁷.

Despite the possibility of connecting social capital and social trust, the fact is that empirical studies have increasingly shown weak or no correlation between measures of membership in networks and positive responses to traditional social trust questions. This might well be because the set of questions normally used to measure social trust might be measuring something other than individuals’ *a priori* dispositions, and that actually, trust is a highly contextualised decision. That is the contention of recent major works on trust, such as Russell Hardin’s major work *Trust and Trustworthiness* and Onora O’Neil’s Reith Lectures, which have tended to define it as an estimation of the trustworthiness of specific others¹⁸. This has implications for social capital conceived as social trust: in the first place the question might be too general to capture any true dimension of trust in strangers since decisions to rely on unknown others might only be taken taking a wider

¹⁷ E. L. Glaeser and others, 'What is Social Capital ? The Determinants of Trust and Trustworthiness', (National Bureau of Economic Research, 1999); D. Stolle, 'Getting to trust': and analysis of the importance of institutions, families, personal experiences and group membership', in *Social Capital and Participation in Everyday Life*, ed. by P. Dekker and Eric Uslaner (London: Routledge, 2001); Dietlind Stolle, 'The Sources of Social Capital', in *Generating Social Capital - Civil Society and Institutions in Comparative Perspective*, ed. by Marc Hooge and Dietlind Stolle (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

¹⁸ Russell Hardin, *Trust and Trustworthiness*, Russell Sage Foundation Series on Trust (New York, NY: Russell Sage, 2002), IV; *A Question of Trust*. BBC Radio 4. 2002.

variety of factors into consideration, such as the possibility of third party enforcement, the interpretation of certain signs of trustworthiness¹⁹, or the salience of the loss if trust is misplaced. As such social trust questions might be simply reflecting certain perceptions of the world in general that may be quite unrelated to their ability to enter into cooperative relationships. It is perfectly possible to imagine someone who engaged fully in civic life, with all the benefits thus accrued to themselves and society at large, but who might well answer that most people are not to be trusted, because the world around them is a dangerous and unforgiving place. Do volunteers in crime-ridden inner city neighbourhoods carry large amounts of money when they go to work in problematic areas²⁰?

The argument put forward here is not that social trust is an unimportant good for societies, even if it needs more concrete definition, and it is possible that surveys of social trust may well be picking up important social phenomena. The point is that there is little proof that social trust and social capital are so closely related that they can be considered as exclusive cause and effect of each other, let alone whether social trust should be considered an element of social capital.

In conclusion, social trust is a prickly concept, even more so than social capital. The benefits for research of using social trust as part of the definition of social capital, or even its measures as proxies, are fraught with difficulties. Cognitive features such as trust and reciprocity are certainly an important aspect of social capital, but their aggregation proves difficult, as do proving defining links between social capital and generalised trust. A great part of the more fruitful work on social capital has been undertaken at the individual or group level where the relationships between these elements are easier to observe. Social capital research is more likely to benefit from understanding such cognitive features as bounded by networks and search for more precise, but perhaps less direct,

¹⁹ Michael Bacharach and Diego Gambetta, 'Trust in Signs', in *Trust in Society*, ed. by Karen S Cook (New York, NY: Russell Sage, 2001).

²⁰ In fact, recent work has also criticised measures of social trust used throughout the field for conflating trust with caution, a factor which is also highly dependent on personal, and ecological variables. See Alan S. Miller and Tomoko Mitamura, 'Are Surveys on Trust Trustworthy?' *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 66 (2003), 62-70.

mechanisms through which networks ruled by norms of reciprocity may influence society at large by facilitating collective action. In essence, it may well be the social capital should learn to walk before it aspires to run: as Michael Woolcock has argued, researchers on social capital must do the hard work of integrating serious qualitative and quantitative work research strategies before jumping to make grand claims for the concept with second-best proxies and indicators²¹.

Social capital as networks that facilitate collective action

Another school of thought when it comes to social capital has focused on its nature as those resources that facilitate collective action and cooperation. Such an interpretation is an important part of both James Coleman's and Robert Putnam's definitions of the concept, although neither approach can be reduced to such a sparse concept. For Putnam, social norms and networks are '*...an institutional mechanism with the power to ensure compliance with the collectively desirable behaviour*²²'. As we have seen Putnam has an expansive definition of social capital that encompasses the capacity of networks to allow access to resources such as social support, jobs and loans, and produce norms that may have wider benefits to society. But central to the Putnamian notion of social capital is also the capacity of individuals to join together in cooperative ventures, as it is clear from his preoccupation with the decline of voluntary organizations in the United States.

The capacity for collective action as an important resource has been the focus of attention in a number of areas, of which we can highlight the literature concerned with the quality of civil society and its effect on democracy (following Putnam) and work focusing on the economy and society of developing countries. It was in the latter field that social capital research underwent a revolution with the World Bank turning its attention to the effects of social relations and informal institutions in individual livelihoods and wider development outcomes. The World Bank Social Capital initiative produced a number of

²¹ Michael Woolcock, 'Social Capital in Theory and Practice: Where do we Stand?' in *Social Capital And Economic Development - Well-being in Developing Countries*, ed. by Jonathan Isham, Thomas Kelly and Sunder Ramaswamy (Northampton, MA.: Edward Elgar, 2002).

²² Putnam, *Bowling Alone*: p.288

studies that saw networks and the norms of reciprocity that sustain them as crucial in activating collective endeavours that may help development initiatives.

In one such study using household survey data from 64 villages in Rajasthan in India, Krishna and Uphoff found that social capital was the variable that best predicted a village's ability to solve certain collective action dilemmas, in this case managing communal watershed programs. Isham and Kähkönen, in another World Bank sponsored study, found similar effects at play in community-based water projects in Indonesia. Social capital was also found to be an important input into successful collective organization of waste management by neighbourhoods in Bangladesh²³.

The World Bank led studies have developed from, and in parallel with the interest of economics as a discipline in social capital. There is a growing body of economic theory which has tended to look at the roles of social networks and the norms embodied in them as a factor in the emergence of cooperation: recently Annen defined social capital as reputation transmitted through networks. The effects of reputation within a network are an incentive for trustworthy behaviour, since if one party defaults on their promise, transmission of such information through the network will dissuade other parties from placing their trust in them and therefore removing them from the future benefits of cooperation. The economic advantage of social capital, as seen from this perspective, is to informally provide a mechanism that at a low cost to all (talk is cheap), facilitates cooperation with reduced risks. Parallel debates on the role of informal institutions in facilitating cooperation and the solution of social dilemmas by individuals organised in networks has been a growing field in economics, as Dasgupta has shown²⁴. More recently, some authors have tried to combine rational choice theories of collective action with the insights of the social capital literature. In a challenging article, Ostrom and Ahn

²³ Krishna, A. and N. Uphoff (1999), "Mapping and Measuring Social Capital: A Conceptual and Empirical Study of Collective Action for Conserving and Developing Watersheds in Rajasthan, India", Social Capital Initiative Working Paper No. 13.; Isham, J. and S. Kähkönen (1999), "What Determines the Effectiveness of Community-Based Water Projects? Evidence from Central Java, Indonesia on Demand Responsiveness, Service Rules, and Social Capital", Social Capital Initiative Working Paper No. 14.; Pargal, S., M. Huq, and D. Gilligan (1999), "Social Capital in Solid Waste Management: Evidence from Dhaka, Bangladesh", Social Capital Initiative Working Paper No. 16.

²⁴ Dasgupta, 'Economic Progress and the Idea of Social Capital'.

have defined social capital as ‘*a core theoretical concept that helps to synthesize how cultural, social and institutional aspects of community jointly affect their capacity to deal with collective action problems*²⁵,

Ostrom and Ahn are at the forefront of the group of researchers that tend to see social capital as a capacity for collective action. Their approach is particularly refreshing because it clearly distinguishes what social capital is – a set of attributes of individuals and their relationships – from what it does, which is to influence collective action. This is extremely important if social capital is to be established as a politically neutral concept since it avoids defining preferred outcomes (such as more voluntary associations) as social capital. On the other hand, by separating social capital from a potential output of social capital, it avoids the tautology inherent in Coleman’s functional definition of social capital.

Nevertheless, Ostrom and Ahn’s approach leaves something to be desired by neglecting discussions that have been ongoing in the field. In their definition of social capital, Ostrom and Ahn include not just the networks and norms embedded in them as social capital, but also the wider panoply of rules, norms and institutions that establish mechanism for regulation of social relationships, punish defection, provide information and conflict resolution spaces to individuals – in sum, social capital is for Ostrom and Ahn networks and their norms, but also every aspect of the social structure, from a village council to a modern judicial system, that helps people engage in cooperation with each other.

Such a definition becomes so all encompassing that it loses parsimony, clarity and analytical value: while it rightly restricts the direct outcomes of social capital and avoids functional definitions, it allows all kinds of factors that might indirectly influence individual’s capacity to cooperate to be brought into a variable that soon becomes unmanageable. There is no doubt that networks do not exist in a social and political

²⁵ Elinor Ostrom and T. K. Ahn, 'Introduction.' in *Foundations of Social Capital*, ed. by Elinor Ostrom and T. K. Ahn (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Pub., 2003):. p.? (CHECK)

vacuum, and that they are shaped and influenced by institutions, furthermore, their capacity to produce certain goods is also constrained by the surrounding social and political infrastructure, as has been made clear by other authors²⁶, but these wider influences need not be crammed into the definition any more than the invention of the printing press needs to be included in the definition of human capital.

A further important distinction to be made between the claims of the capacity for collective action perspective and those of the school of social capital as social trust is that, while both claim to be about a capacity for collective action, they are working at different levels. The crucial difference lies in the question of embeddedness in networks. According to the assumptions of many in what we would call the collective action networks approach, the potential effect of social capital on collective action is limited to those who are part of the networks of social capital. The literature focusing on social trust uses much of the same language, namely referring to the importance of social capital in resolving dilemmas of collective action and providing collective goods. Crucially, however, the social trust approach does not see networks as a central part of the question, as they see social capital producing goods that are available even to those outside the networks that constitute social capital. The difference between the two lies not in whether one focuses solely on structural aspects of society such as networks and the other purely on cognitive features, such as trust. Most theorists of social capital have accepted that it is a multidimensional phenomenon that can combine both structural and cognitive features. The crucial difference lies in the fact that the networks of collective action approach sees the cognitive elements of social capital as bounded by the networks of social capital. To clarify this point, the networks based approach sees reciprocity as an element of social capital in so far as it is a characteristic of a network capable of producing collective action, not as a general disposition of individuals towards unspecified or unknown others.

Nevertheless the fact that norms of reciprocity are still necessary to activate the potential of networks to facilitate collective action is clear. This is clear if we go through Putnam's discussion of vertical and horizontal networks in *Making Democracy Work*: networks

²⁶ See Szreter and Woolcock, 'Health by Association',

organised hierarchically according to control or power are less likely to produce cooperation because they are less likely to be characterised by norms of reciprocity. The reciprocity needed for cooperation will not be available if one of the parties has the power to avoid the sanctions for defection. In sum, the position of the networks of collective action perspective states that if a network is ruled by accepted, enforceable and enforced rules of reciprocity, it can be termed as social capital, i.e. a capacity for cooperative behaviour.

In ending this section, however, it is also important to draw attention to certain elements of networks that multiply their capacity for collective action we should be aware. Beyond the mechanics of collective action described above, networks also carry value-laden messages that influence the attitudes of related individuals and may have an impact in their capacity to act collectively. In recent years, networks theorists concerned with social movements have been attempting to reconcile the rational choice perspective with structuralist views of collective action. Florence Passy has highlighted the socialization, connection and decision-shaping functions of social networks in mobilizing individuals for collective action. According to Passy, networks have a socialization function in so far as they build and reinforce common identities by bringing participants' values preferences and perceptions closer to each other. Networks also work by carrying in them the history and experience of past collective action, which may be a powerful catalyst for future engagement. Networks also serve to connect individuals with the opportunity for action, and shape decisions by carrying information regarding the preferences of other networks members²⁷.

In a theoretical piece on networks and social movements, Roger Gould also helped reintroduced questions of value into mobilization role of networks in collective action by suggesting that participation in social movements has elements that alter the values of social relationships between activists by creating even deeper common identities, and it is the promise of such a shift that makes friendship networks powerful recruitment

²⁷ Florence Passy, 'Social Networks Matter. But How?' in *Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action*, ed. by Mario Diani and D. McAdam (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

networks²⁸. Another element of participation in networks that may be important in facilitating collective action is that under certain circumstances, certain networks may provide the space for the learning of social skills that in turn facilitate individuals ability to cooperate, an idea that goes as far back as Tocqueville, was famously defended by Almond and Verba and, of course, by Robert Putnam²⁹. These are all elements that may be present in social networks and all in all, it means that social capital research should pay attention to the quality and content of relationships that form social capital to the extent that these are likely to influence network members capacity for collective action. However, awareness of these does not necessarily mean that all these elements should be packed into the definition of social capital because they cannot be said to be irreducible elements of social capital.

Social Capital and Civil Society

It is my contention that understanding social capital as a capacity for collective action, rooted in networks and the norms embedded in these is the most fruitful way of thinking of social capital in relation to its possible impacts beyond the individual, and as such its relationship with civil society, in the same way that focusing on the resources accessed through social networks may be the best way to think of the individual benefits of social capital.

The conceptualization of social capital I tentatively present should not be interpreted simply as a network-structural view on the issue of collective action – social capital is not just appropriating the methods of a different school and changing its name. I believe that its dual emphasis on norms, as well as networks, can be productive. Such a marriage of what is traditionally defined as quantitative and qualitative (a false dichotomy, as if statistical analysis were not an interpretation in itself, and interpretation could never use

²⁸ Roger V. Gould, 'Why do networks matter? Rationalist and structuralist interpretations', in *Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action*, ed. by Mario Diani and D. McAdam (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

²⁹ Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963); Putnam, *Bowling Alone*; Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. by George Lawrence (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1990).

mathematical analysis) is of course not easy. But recent empirical work (see discussion of Gould, Passy, Ostrom and Ahn etc. above) and theoretical work has, in my view, taken promising steps by attempting such a compromise.

Structural analysis by itself can miss how apparently equivalent structures are ruled by different norms, which in turn can mean they have different potentials when it comes to collective action. Taking a basic example, of a simple network often at the basis of many kinds of collective action, economic, social and political, the family. In a variety of different historical and geographical contexts, many authors have pointed to the role of the complex household structure as an expression of cooperation and solidarity (FTN). By complex structures they typically mean more than one couple related by kinship residing in the same household, normally a couple residing with at least one of their married children. Whereas structurally they can be identical when seen from a distance, they can in reality be ruled by different sets of norms on account of context, culture, economic structure, etc. A cursory glance at three spatially and historically distinct occurrences of the same structure could help make this clear: in post-emancipation Russia, power and therefore the direction of relations of obligation and particular kinds of solidarity often rested with the middle-aged couple, and in particular the male half of it by virtue of representation in the village council which distributes land, a power relation. However, in early modern Europe, property rights meant power emanated from the patriarch controlling the land. Finally, in contemporary Europe, especially in the south, there is often an expectation of reciprocity where younger couples look after their older parents in the household in return for contribution to household incomes from welfare benefits³⁰. This quick, and oversimplified, contrast can nevertheless show how similar structures can contain relationships that vary widely in their content.

Furthermore, narrowing the definition of social capital in the way I have described above allows us to accommodate many of the important criticisms made of social capital. Such a definition manages to separate what it claims social capital to be (norms and networks)

³⁰ David Sven Reher, 'Family Ties in Western Europe: Persistent Contrasts', *Population and Development Review*, 24 (1998), 203-34

from what it does (collective action), so that the process and conditions through which causes produce effects can be studied.

It also makes the ‘goodness’ of social capital relative, rendering it politically neutral. Since Portes, many authors have criticised the emphasis of social capital on positive outcomes, leading to discussions of the ‘dark side’ of social capital. Once again, by separating the definition from the effects it has, it removes value judgement from the concept and recognizes that action can be put to any end. It is the end-product, not the cause, which can and should be normatively judged.

The aim of such a conceptualisation of social capital is not to give primary explicatory power to social networks ruled by norms of reciprocity into accounts of civil society and collective action, but rather to explain certain ‘ground-level’ mechanisms in such a way that brittle and verifiable theories can be falsifiable. Social capital becomes one of the elements that shape collective action, to be evaluated alongside others such as motivation, institutional context or leadership.

Understanding social capital in the way I have just defended has implications for its relationship to civil society in a number of ways. In the first place social capital is a resource that, although it can be aggregated in measurement in the same way that financial capital is, just as money, not equally accessible to all. As such I reject ‘macro’ accounts of social capital as an all-pervasive ‘happy’ norm that makes civil society work better. It is the actions facilitated by social capital that, in relation with other actions from different sectors and exogenous factors, shape the form of civil society.

Nevertheless, social capital as a mechanism can perhaps be a resource of groups as actors, not just a resource available to groups of actors, to the extent that groups can forge alliances and develop relationships mediated by certain norms of reciprocity³¹. However,

³¹ Both Bebbington and Krishna have published social capital studies focusing on the group level with interesting results: A. Bebbington and T. F. Carroll, 'Peasant federations and rural development policies in the Andes', *Policy Sciences*, 33 (2000), 435-57; Anirudh Krishna, *Active social capital: tracing the roots of development and democracy*, Anirudh Krishna.

this must be seen as a separate empirical question to that of the social capital of groups of individuals who act collectively, since it would be a mistake to simply aggregate upwards considering that the issue of the transferability of social capital is far from determined, as Anirudh Krishna has argued³².

Naturally, however, we can and should ask the question of under what circumstances can social capital be mobilized for certain ends that we have determined to be public goods. In regards to this, one of the most important theoretical contributions to social capital, that of Michael Woolcock, who also tends towards a reductive view of social capital as a capacity for collective action³³, has proposed a framework with which to investigate the relationship between social capital and civil society. Woolcock builds on the distinctions of bonding and bridging social capital, to which he adds the definition of linking social capital, and draws on work of political sociologists such as Peter Evans³⁴ to argue that it is different combinations of types of social capital amongst communities, and the characteristics of their relationships to other entities in society, that determine the types of societal effects of social capital³⁵. For Woolcock, each of the types of social capital, bonding (defined as in-group ties); bridging (relationships to out-groups more or less on equivalent structural positions) and linking (ties connecting groups and people across power differentials) performs a different function, also dependent on the social and institutional context in which it is located. For Woolcock, distinct combinations of these types of social capital in relation to institutional context are expressed in different types of civil societies.

Woolcock then, provides social capital researchers with a plausible theoretical framework to examine the relationships we are concerned with here, but it is not the only perspective

ill. ; 24 cm. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

³² Anirudh Krishna, 'Collective Action and Social Capital: Does the Theory Support Expectations?' *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, (Forthcoming)

³³ Michael Woolcock and Deepa Narayan, 'Social capital : implications for development theory, research and policy', *The World Bank Research Observer*, 15 (2000), 225-49

³⁴ Peter Evans, 'Government Action, Social Capital and Development: Reviewing the Evidence of Synergy', *World Development*, 24 (1996), 1119-32

³⁵ Szreter and Woolcock, 'Health by Association', ; M. Woolcock, 'Social capital and economic development: Toward a theoretical synthesis and policy framework', *Theory and Society*, 27 (1998), 151-208

that can do so. There are a number of fields with parallel debates, with which the social capital research agenda can benefit from having a dialogue, particularly regarding the role of organized groups and political mobilisation, as well as issues of political or civic culture. The following paragraphs will briefly outline two areas of research where recent theoretical synthesis have given us tools to assess the processes that mediate between social capital and wider outcomes, in social movement theory by McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, and in the theory of associations by Mark Warren.

The Tocquevillian tradition in social capital, spearheaded by Putnam, has always put the role of associations at the fore regarding the link between social capital and ‘good’ civil society. However, wider claims as to the role of associations have been criticised by many for assuming that participation in any kind of association brings benefits to the wider community³⁶. But beyond the field of social capital, recent theoretical works have attempted to put forward a structure through which the role of associations in civil society can be analysed. In a recent review of the literature, Archon Fung has highlighted the six mechanisms of potential influence of associations on democracy that have been the subject of most attention: the intrinsic value of freedom of association; in the words of Tocqueville, the notion of associations as ‘schools of democracy’, fostering civic virtues and teaching political skills; their capacity to act as a check on the power of the state and be a locus of resistance; their representation faculties; their role as a space for public deliberation, channelling public participation and opinion; and the possibility of associations engaging in participatory governance³⁷. Despite some dissenting voices (Roßteutscher has argued that associative culture is simply a reflection of dominant political culture³⁸), and the understanding that generalisations are impossible as the possibility of each association providing any or all of these functions depends on the characteristics of the association itself, and the associational ecologies and political

³⁶ Stolle, 'The Sources of Social Capital'; Dietlind Stolle and T. Rochon, 'Are All Associations Alike? Member Diversity, Associational Type and the Creation of Social Capital', *American Behavioral Scientist*, 41 (1998), 47-65

³⁷ Archon Fung, 'Associations and Democracy: Between Theories, Hopes, and Realities', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 29 (2003), 515-39

³⁸ Roßteutscher, 'Advocate or Reflection? Associations and Political Culture', *Political Studies*, (2002), 514-28

contexts in which they are embedded³⁹, it is becoming increasingly clear how associations may have an impact on democracy.

Mark Warren in particular has proposed a theoretical framework with which to evaluate the ways in which associations, as institutions of civil society, can have an impact on democracy, on other systems. Warren defines three broad categories of effects that associations can have on democracy, developmental (regarding the democratic capacities of individual citizens), public sphere (formation of public opinion and public judgement) and institutional (through collective political action)⁴⁰. For Warren, a given association's capacity to provide these effects is dependent on four factors: its ease of exit, or the degree to which they are voluntary; its constitutive media, or the how its internal decision making process is organized, through a logic of power, market forces or social relations; whether the association is 'vested' or 'non-vested', that is whether it is embedded in its medium and seeks to reproduce it or it stands without trying to alter the status quo; and finally, effects are also dependent on manifest purposes of the association⁴¹. Furthermore, Warren also sees the democratic effects of associations as depending on context, both political in a wide sense, and in the sense of the distribution of types of associations in the polity and their relations to each other, as well as on the distribution of associational attachments among citizens.

The role of associations as part of civil society is of course not restricted to democratic context, but Warren's framework, is a starting point for research into the political role of such institutions in a variety of contexts. The argument I am developing here is that these associations, do not constitute social capital, but that they have in social capital one of their important roots in so much as they are expressions of collective action. If we accept that associations, in the manner proposed by Warren, or any other author that pays equal attention to the diversity of associations and their effect, then the key question for the

³⁹ Jan W. van Deth, *Private groups and public life : social participation, voluntary associations and political involvement in representative democracies*, edited by Jan W. van Deth. (London ; New York: Routledge, 1997); Mark E. Warren, *Democracy and Association* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁴⁰ Warren, *Democracy and Association*.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* Chapter 5, pp. 94-133.

social capital researcher becomes what kinds and what patterns of distribution of social capital facilitate the creation of what kinds of associations, without forgetting that associations themselves can influence existing stocks of and create further social capital by providing opportunity to strengthen existing bonds, create new ones, or by undertaking actions that influence the context within social capital is created.

Taking just an example from Warren's categories, that of ease of exit of associations, or the degree to which they are voluntary, it is clear how social capital can matter in determining the type of association that acts its part in civil society. Warren does not envisage an automatic positive relation between ease of exit and 'good' democratic effect. Groups from which exit is difficult, such as those based on strong identities, can be internally more democratic because members only capacity for voice is through its own representative structure; however, where exit is easy, self selection might distil interests and representation better⁴². One can easily build the hypothesis that ease of exit is related to the social capital used to build such groups: groups built along strong, bonding social capital networks, where norms embedded in these networks discourage defection, such as some ethnic groups or radical political sects, are more likely to be to a great extent 'non-voluntary'.

But civil society is of course not restricted to formal voluntary institutions. Discussions of these must intersect with discussion of different, and sometimes wider, forms of political organizations referred to under the heading of social movements. Here I will briefly note the recent theoretical synthesis of the field being proposed by McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, McAdam, and Diani⁴³. These authors aim to go beyond structuralist and rationalist accounts of social movements by incorporating dynamics of change, as well questions of culture and identity. Social capital becomes pertinent and compatible with the framework

⁴² Ibid. pp. 96-7.

⁴³ Mario Diani, 'Networks and Social Movements: A Research Programme', in *Social Movements and Networks - Relational Approaches to Collective Action*, ed. by Mario Diani and D. McAdam (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); D. McAdam, 'Beyond Structural Analysis: Toward a More Dynamic Understanding of Social Movements', in *Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action*, ed. by D. McAdam and Mario Diani (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); D. McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

being proposed by the authors of *Dynamics of Contention* at various levels. Social capital, defined as I attempted, can be useful in studying the pre-existence, creation and appropriation of forms of organization that offer sites of mobilization; how these can become facilitators or blockages to action; and how these are used in the development of contentious action, thus helping address the research agenda set by McAdam and his colleagues⁴⁴. Also, social capital is clearly a factor in their discussion of the mechanisms involved in the process of democratization, the authors highlight the role of ‘networks of trust’, whose expansion across categorical inequalities they see as necessary for the successful democratisation of societies⁴⁵. Such an understanding is clearly parallel to discussions of social capital that emphasize the dangers of pockets of ‘bonding’ networks unconnected by ‘bridging’ networks to other groups in society.

MacAdam et al, and more recently MacAdam on his own, have also stressed the importance of networks in the development of moments of contention, through the mechanisms of brokerage and diffusion, which also have remarkable parallels to discussion of bonding and bridging networks in the social capital literature, in so far as diffusion (the transfer of information along established lines of interaction) can be said to be likely to operate through bonding networks and brokerage (the linking of two or more previously unconnected social sites) through bridging, or even linking, networks⁴⁶.

It is not my intention, of course to claim that McAdam et al’s definitions and use of networks in the field of social movements is social capital by another name, or vice-versa. Social movement research, although often seen as a separate discipline to the study of ‘ordinary’ politics, actually deals with much the same issues. As great amount of work has shown, today’s friendly society, moderate trade union, or neighbourhood committee, can tomorrow see its action be transformed into the field of ‘extra-ordinary’ political conflict. As such, the study of collective action cannot be neatly compartmentalised into the pluralists concern for neat do-gooding, law-abiding institutions and movement

⁴⁴ McAdam, 'Beyond Structural Analysis: Toward a More Dynamic Understanding of Social Movements'; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*.

⁴⁵ McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*:274-75

⁴⁶ McAdam, 'Beyond Structural Analysis: Toward a More Dynamic Understanding of Social Movements', pp. 293-6); McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* pp. 332-6.

theorists' enthusiasm for revolution, turmoil, and change, although there are differences between them⁴⁷.

What I am attempting to highlight are the parallels in concerns between the fields and how they can gain from a constructive dialogue, since they are, through different routes, arriving at similar questions, if not yet conclusions. In 'Beyond Structural Analysis', MacAdam calls for an understanding of social movements and networks which is both more dynamic and more attuned to the contents of networks: McAdam is '*...not so much abandoning the structural approach to the study of contention as seeking to supplement it with the insights and methods of more culturally (and rationally) aware movement scholars*⁴⁸'. The conceptualisation of social capital I have presented here tries to do this by joining a concern for the structure of networks with attention to the norms that rule such relationships. On the other hand, social capital theorists have much to learn from the methodological rigour of the network approach, as well as from the efforts to incorporate change and conflict to their analyses, as McAdam and his colleagues have done.

I have started by presenting the now not so uncommon argument that Civil Society is not one coherent and cohesive whole, but rather an encompassing definition that covers a wide variety of actors, and crucially, their actions and interactions with each other and with institutions outside civil society. I have also argued that social capital, in its multiple forms, can be a crucial tool in analysing the roots of civil society by virtue of focusing on the origins of actions, not through the perspective of motivation, but through that of capacity. The diagram below (Figure 1) presents this understanding of social capital. It regards only the 'side' of social capital discussed here, that of social capital as a capacity for collective action, and ignores the role of networks as transmitters of resources which, as discussed above (pp. 4-5), can have effects on civil society, although in a much more indirect manner.

⁴⁷ Diani, 'Networks and Social Movements: A Research Programme', pp. 301-03).

⁴⁸ McAdam, 'Beyond Structural Analysis: Toward a More Dynamic Understanding of Social Movements', (p. 297).

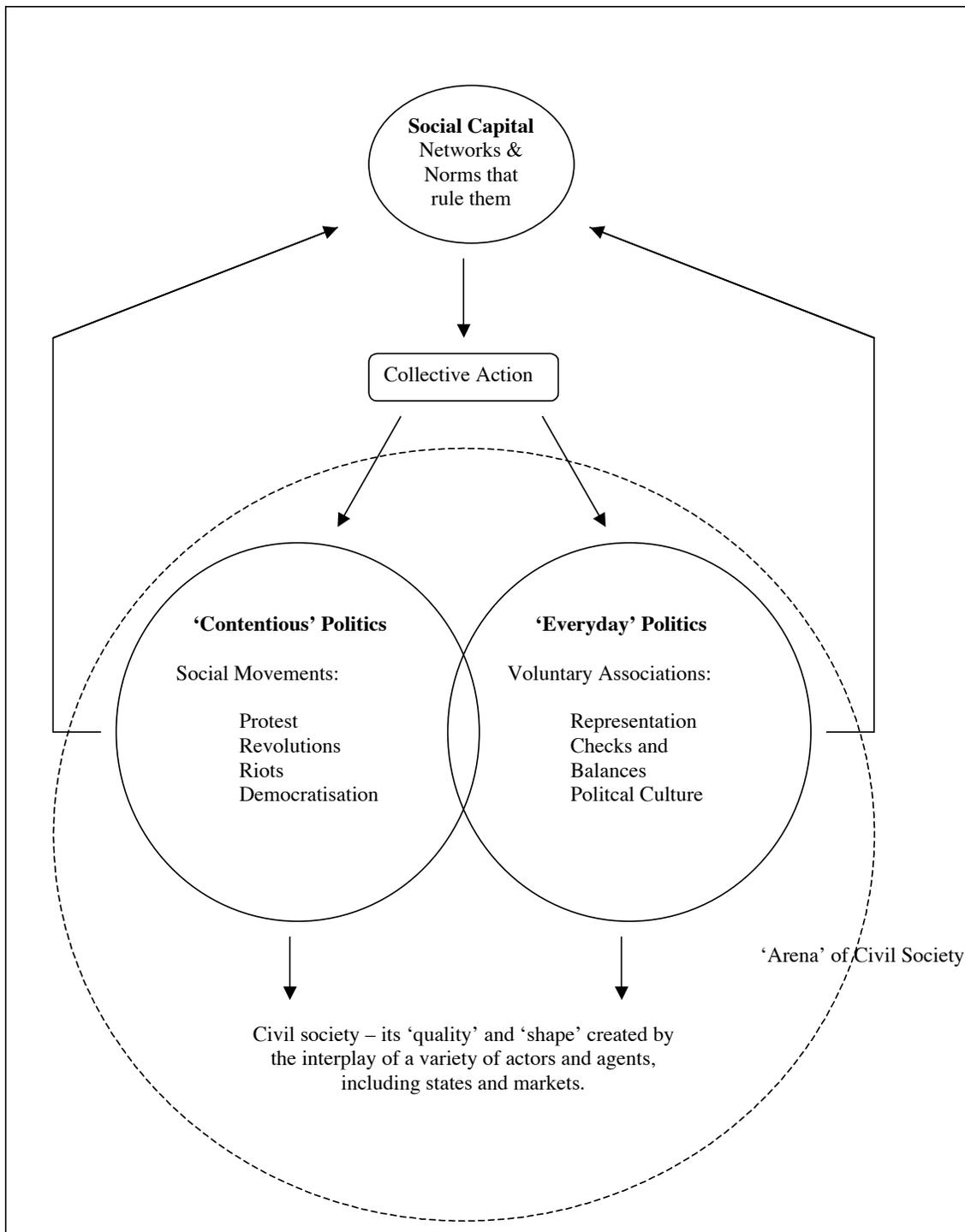


Figure 1. Social Capital, Civil Society and Potential Mediating Channels

The collective action achieved through social capital is here conceptualised as shaping civil society through ‘everyday’ political action by groups, grouped here under the heading of voluntary associations, and through ‘contentious’ politics through social movements. These two fields are linked in so far as social movements often use ‘everyday’ groups, through appropriation or transformation, in contentious action. Conversely, groups formed or active in moments of overt conflict can live on beyond these episodes as they become integrated as actors within the sphere of everyday political interchange. Arrows from each of these spheres feed back into social capital since, as discussed above, social capital is not in itself a static given, but can be shaped by the very same action it helps to create. Finally social movements and organised groups are encompassed by the ‘sphere’ of civil society in so far as that they constitute its dynamic element and interact with other entities (namely the state and the market) within this arena.

In conclusion, social capital is neither a ‘cure’ nor a ‘missing link’. But, if stripped from ideology and *a priori* assumption, it can be a useful tool of analysis that draws on long-established intellectual traditions. It has something to offer in terms of theory, if there is an effort to separate the conflicting strands that intersect under the same heading. Paradoxically, it is at the source of this confusion that we can also find one of social capital’s main advantages. By being embraced by a variety of disciplines, from economics to social psychology, through history and political science, it has brought the methods, assumptions and findings of many researchers from these separate fields into close contact and dialogue with each other. In this sense, we have revealed a ‘bridging’ function of social capital theory that can only have positive outcomes.

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