The concept of social capital : a critical review

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Abstract : *In about 10 years,an impressive quantity of literature has developed, starting in the United-States, on and about the concept of "social capital". Its promoters build on the idea that social relations, shared norms and values and trust facilitate coordination and cooperation between individuals or groups. The idea is not new. What is new is to consider sociability and associational participation, norms, shared values and trust, as a stock of capital at the macro-social level, and to raise it as a unique principle able to explain multiple economic and social phenomenon. The promotion of the "concept", first taken in charge by Robert Putnam, relayed by the World Bank and the OECD, praises the positive - even decisive - impact of "high levels" of social capital on well-being, economic growth, health, educational performance, government efficiency, security and so on. If the concept remains rather vague, the outlines, combining the promise of a capital which is costless and benefits to all, and the idea that the "social" has a value, may seem attractive. Nevertheless, problems appear when empirical studies show that social capital can have contradictory effects at different levels, or according to the indicators used as its measures; in the perspective of public policies, the unfortunate consequence is that it leads to conficting prescriptions. But if we are to follow the promoters, this is only one more good reason for the research to go on, especially in order to find the right indicators of social capital. This paper proposes to discuss the interest of an implementation of the concept as an analytical category and as a statistical category.*

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Introduction

During the past 10 years, the concept of "social capital" has had a spectacular success, as shown by the vitality of the production of articles aimed at its presentation, discussion, and implementation in various problematics. Its attracting features and supposed immense powers have charmed well beyond the academic realm, so social capital has also gained, for an academic concept, an unequalled popularity. This popularity owns a lot to its undisputable champion and most prominent advocate, Robert Putnam; it is his approach to social capital which is now prevailing, to the point where it is said to be the "standard" approach. And it is Putnam's trademark, "Bowling Alone", which accounts for the popularity of the concept beyond academic research.

A first "Bowling Alone", issued in 1995, allows to date the social capital "big bang"; it is not that there was no literature before, but 1995 is the starting point of five years of quasi-exponential growth of its volume - the starting point of the bubble. To this literature, and to the promotion of the concept, the World Bank has contributed substancially: a committee was created in 1993 (year of the publication of Putnam's seminal research, "Making democracy work" - it is worth noting that Putnam was a member of this World Bank's committee), a research programm was launched in 1996 (Social Capital Initiative), and a dedicated website opened in 1998 within the Bank's site.

In 2000, Putnam does another "Bowling Alone", this time a book, resulting from thorough research (at the end of 1999, a team of no less than 50 reseachers was working on the project) and compilation of all the statsitics available that can be related, one way or the other, to social capital.

At the end of the 1990s, the Oecd is on its turn caught by the concept: a symposium was organized in Quebec, gathering many researchers (Putnam was one of them), and in 2001, a report "The well being of Nations - the role of human and social capital" assessed the importance of the issue; well beyond an "expert opinion", this report is amazingly enthusiastic for the concept and its supposed powers. Powers that only a relevant measure of social capital could confirm. But curiously, even though the promotion of social capital stands largely on empirical arguments, underlining the correlation between high "stocks" or "levels" of social capital and any type of desirable outcome, it appears that no one knows exactly how to measure it - or rather that it can be measured in so many ways that tests end mainly in spurious results. So social capital measurement became, at the end of the 1990s, such a crucial matter that the Oecd took, in 2002, the leadership of an enterprise named "Social capital: the challenge of international measurement". But what was it exactly that was to be measured?

The "what is" question is of first importance, because despite the amount of literature, social capital remains shadowy: studies may implement the same notions (networks, norms, reciprocity, trust, shared values and so on), the very sense they are given and the way they are combined varies with the authors and/or the questions addressed. The notion of network for example is used to mean a set of relationships as well as a set of individuals; a network can be conceived as a means of access to exclusive resources, or as the "place" of production of norms supposed to affect a whole society - or just a part of it. Norms are from one author to the other moral or ethiclal values that the actors internalize, or rules that effectiveness lies in the capacity of a society (or a part of it) to sanction deviant behaviors. Trust is used sometimes as an equivalent of trustworthiness, sometimes as an equivalent of the confidence placed in a "generalized other", or in more specific kinds of others; it is sometimes conceived as resulting from repeated interactions, and sometimes as the thing that allows the interactions to take place. This lack of conceptual neatness finds a contrastingly neat illustration in empirical studies, which show a collection of results difficult to reconcile from one study to the other, but can always be reconnected to a conceptual approach that will fit; and at least, it is also possible to attribute inconsistent results to the "measurement" problem.

The conceptual polysemy and the empirical contradictions are generally acknowleged in the literature, but this leads to diverse interpretations: for the adepts, it would be a manifestation of the multidimensionnal aspects of social capital; it would also explain why it is so difficult to measure. For the critics, it just shows conceptual weaknesses and theoretical vagueness. In the first faction, of course apart from Robert Putnam, M. Woolcock for example, who, recognizing that "*(…) a single term is inadequate to explain the range of empirical situations demanded of it, that it confuses sources and consequences, justifies contradictory social policies, and understates corresponding negative aspects (…)*" nevertheless concludes: "*Short of dismissing the term altogether, one possible resolution of these concerns may be that there are different types, levels or dimensions of social capital, different performance outcomes associated with different combinations of these dimensions, and different sets of conditions that support or weaken favorable combinations*" (Woolcock, 1998, p.159). In other words, let's use the same expression to name different things, which function differently and that have different outcomes. Among the critics, we find authors as different as Portes (1998), Solow (1995, 1999), Arrow (1999) or Durlauf (1999, 2002), who, in short, recommand either to set more neatly the limits of the concept, or to avoid using it.

This paper proposes a critical reading of social capital[1], in three steps: the first one will provide with basic elements from the main references in the social capital literature; the second one will give some examples of empirical work, and the last one will focus on the measurement enterprise as engaged by the Oecd. The paper ends on a question: does the prevailing conceptualization of social capital lead to anything that can be thought of as a value added?

1. Social capital : what is it ?

The main difficulty with social capital is that the same expression covers several ideas. However, there is one staple notion in it: group participation may have positive effects for individuals or for collectivities. As Portes (1998) remarks, a search to find the origins of such a general idea means to review almost all the sociological literature since the 19th century (it's tempting to add, even a substancial part of political philosophy and history of thought since Aristotle). In this first section, we try to show how this rather undisputed idea is conceptualized in the main references of the dedicated literature, and also to give an idea of the more general discourse accompanying conceptualization.

[1] For a more detailed review, see Ponthieux (2003).

Almost all the approaches to social capital are refering to Coleman; we'll start with him, even though he did not contribute further in the promotion of the concept.

1.1. James Coleman and the uncertain nature of social capital

In Coleman's approach, the social context is characterized by the organization of the relations between actors: that is the social structures. These structures are thought of as the resources which constitute social capital, and Coleman defines it, in a clearly functionnal way, as the features of the structure which facilitate the actions of individuals:

> « *Social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity, but a variety of different entities having two characteristics in common: They all consist of some aspect of a social structure, and they facilitate certain actions of individuals who are within the structure. Like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible.* » (1988, p. S98).

Such a definition may seem obscure: some aspects of the structure, which facilitate some actions within the structure, it does not really outline a neat "capital" object; and in fact, if social capital, at least according to Coleman, looks like others capitals, it is at the same time very different from them because of the way it is created: "*Unlike other forms of capital, social capital inheres in the structure of relations between persons and among persons"* (*id.*). We agree with Coleman that it is an important difference, especially since he wants to establish social capital by analogy with physical and human capital. It is different, because the usual idea of a capital in economics doesn't see it as inherent to an environment, but as a thing which results from a decision, as Arrow puts it, "*a deliberate sacrifice in the present for future benefit*" (Arrow, 1999, p.4). But with Coleman, social capital does not result from such (or any) decision: "*most forms of social capital are created or destroyed as by-products of other activities*" (Coleman, 1988, p. S118). So social capital is not produced; rather, it "happens", a by-product of other activities. In an economic sense, it is not a capital, but an externality; and the fact that such an externality, in facilitating the actions of actors, might have positive outcomes does not make it a capital.

Yet it is not this fundamental difference which attracts Coleman's eyes, but another one; what he puts as most important are the intangible and unalienable features of social capital, making that those who benefit from it cannot own it; and that's the basis on which social capital is equated to a public good, and an attribute of the structure, not of the individuals. But in the end, he insists on the fact that it is the individuals who benefit from it, in the way they use it to achieve their own goals: "*The function identified by the concept 'social capital' is the value of those aspects of social structure to actors, as resources that can be used by the actors to realize their interests*" (p. S101). All the aspects of the social structure are nevertheless not equivalent, either in their value in use, or in the way the actors value them; this value may also vary according to the contexts. And also, if a given form of social capital may be of value in certain actions, it can be useless, and even harmful for other actions (or for the interests of other actors).

This said, Coleman gives many exemples of the positive outcomes of social capital. One of the best known is that of the diamond market of New York. According to Coleman, this market is exemplary because the merchants exchange between them, without any formal precautions, diamonds of great value. Their “insurance” is trust. The merchants trust each other because they all belong to the same community, a community of dense familial relationships. If ever a merchant were to cheat, he would immediately be excluded not only from the market, but also banned from the community. This example is indeed exemplary, because it contains all the elements of Coleman’s conception of social capital: there is a benefit, and it is more easily (less costly) obtained than if the merchants were not trusting each other; there is a relatively small community, rather closed on itself; there are dense relationships that facilitate reputations building and the circulation of information; there is a norm of trustworthiness enforced by effective sanctions (exclusion, and probably other psychological pressure but Coleman does not goes into that line). So in the end, we have here all the forms of social capital that Coleman enumerates: expectations and obligagtions, information channels, norms and sanctions. The diamond merchants are also connected in a closed set of familial relationships: in such a context, cooperation is the rational behavior. The interest of the actor (at least if he/she wants to stay within the community) is to conform. Social capital then seems to act as a social control.

The main problem that remains is that we still don’t know exactly what social capital is, because the conceptualization precisely eludes a definition: inhering in the social structure, social capital can only be observed by its consequences when the actors use it, and then its consequences are its proof. But whitout any *ex ante* perimeter which would at least exclude some features of a social structure, one cannot be sure of what is and what is not social capital. It ends in a risk of circularity which has been underlined by several authors (*eg.* Portes, 1998; Durlauf, 1999).

All this leaves us with a vague object, amalgamating attributes of a structure, perceptions of the actors, and individual benefits. To say the least, the basis allows for many interpretations.

1.2. Robert Putnam : bowlingalone.com

If one starts in social capital by a visit at *bowlingalone.com*, he/she might emerge from it with mixed feelings: there is something of a general mobilization order in it that some might find a little extreme. But when one looks at the figures, there’s no way to doubt any more that “decline” underrates the seriousness of the situation (at least in the United-States): given the trends in the past 25 years, most of the stock of social capital (which seems to be made of club meetings, having friends over and family diners) would probably entirely vanish within a few years. Yet there is a way to stop this trend, as revealed by some “surprising facts”: eg. “*ten minutes of commuting reduces social capital by 10%*”, which suggests that refraining from commuting too much would do the trick (how people would get at work is another question); even better, social capital is good also at a more self-interest level, since it increases one’s life expectancy, as revealed also in the “surprising facts”: “*joining one group cuts in half your odds of dying next year*”. At this point, there’s nothing else to do than join “BetterTogether.org” (a companion website), buy the book, and spread the word.

This is not the least of Robert Putnam’s contribution to social capital. The main others are “Making democracy work” in 1993, the seminal work on the factors which make political institutions efficient, “Bowling Alone: America’s declining social capital”, in 1995, starting point of the recent career of social capital, and one of the most cited articles in the next five years; and, in 2000, “Bowling Alone: the collapse and revival of American community”, a systematic review of the trends of civic engagement, of the reasons for the decilne, of the reasons why it is serious, and a program to rescue Amercica’s social capital.

“Making democracy work” (Putnam, 1993a) presents the results of a thorough investigation, started in the 1970s, on the institutionnal performances of the 20 new Italian regions. Comparing these regions, Putnam and his colleagues end on an unambiguous assessment: there are some regions - mostly in the North - who have efficient, reactive, reliable administrations, to the highest statisfaction of their citizens. And there are other regions - mostly in the South - where it is exactly the contrary. The difference between the former and the latter cannot be explained by differences in wealth, political inclination, demography or geography. In fact, and it would not have surprised Tocqueville, the neat opposition lies in people’s civic engagement: in the North, the population shows a high propensity to associational participation (*eg.* choral societies, literary clubs and football clubs), and a high degree of interest for public affairs, as illustrated by newspapers reading and voting turnout; in the South, social life is at best apathetic, and political life means populism and corruption. And what is more, according to Putnam *et al.*, it’s been so from the 14^{th} century on, when Northern region were already endowed with these civic virtues that the Southern regions were already lacking. So the quality of a democracy (seen firstly as the efficiency of its administrations), as well as the level of economic development can be explained as the result of virtuous (or vicious) dynamics, rooted in the features of medieval societies.

To explain the virtuous dynamics, Putnam provides a theory: the spill over theory. In their associations (networks), people learn to trust each other, and to cooperate in order to achieve common goals; successful cooperations lead in turn to an increased taste for cooperation, even outside the associations where the learning takes place; if many people are members of many associations, it spreads in whole communities: “*If the civic community associations proliferate, memberships overlap, and participation spills into multiple arenas of community life*” (Putnam, 1993a, p. 183). This is how “Making democracy works” provides the basis for the social capital rhetoric, the central assessment of a causality which goes from a high propensity to participate in associations (*i.e.* a high stock of social capital) to high social, economic and institutionnal performances: “*Strong society, strong state ; strong society, strong economy*” is the lesson.

Social capital enters the story here: a strong society is characterised by the size of its social capital, defined as:

> “*those features of social organization, such as trust, norms and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions*” (id. p. 167).

There are networks which are more favourable to the creation of high stocks of social capital than others; the best ones are networks of horizontal relationships, that is where actors are equal in power and status (p.173). They’re opposed to vertical networks, where relationships are ruled according to hierarchy, and power asymetries, which prevent people from feeling responsible and being involved in the achievement of common goals. All in all, if one want to have an idea of the amount of social capital available to a society, there's just to count the number of civic associations of the first type: the more of them, the higher the taste of the population for cooperation and the public good.

"Making democracy work" was praised at the time for the novelty of the approach, combining pluri-disciplinarity and innovative use of statistics. It's also been criticized very strongly, about the interpretation of the data (Goldberg, 1996), the treatment of the Italian history (Tarrow, 1996), the conception of social capital (Levi, 1996; Portes, 1998; Boix & Posner, 1996), and because it confuses causes and effects and leads to circular reasoning (Portes, 1998; Durlauf, 1999).

What Putnam had seen in Italy, he generalizes back home with "The prosperous community. Social capital and public life" (1993b), a short presentation of the Italian study, and the occasion to switch to a rhetoric where any question can be answered in terms of social capital. In the United-States, social capital can explain why teenagers fall into delinquency: because they live in neighborhood which are poor in social capital. In South-East Asia, it is their social capital which permitted countries such a spectacular growth. On the contrary, it is because they lack social capital that countries in transition have such difficulties to emerge from their transitional state; later developments have even argued that social capital (or rather its absence) explain the mortality crisis in Russia[2]. And in developing countries, social capital explains why some projects are successful why other fail. The power of social capital then seems illimited. By the same token, its decline appears as a greater matter of concern.

From 1995 on, Putnam will focus on three tasks: make an inventory of the symptoms of the decline, show how high levels of social capital are systematically associated with desired outcomes, and push (successfully) for research on social capital to go on. No doubt, he writes (1995), that the mechanisms by which civic engagement and social connections produce such positive outcomes -better schools, faster economic development, lower crime, and better governments- are complex; social capital will help to understand them. He credits Coleman for having invented the concept; his own conceptualization can be summarized in the following lines:

> "*(…) social capital refers to features of social organization such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.*
> *For a variety of reasons, life is easier in a community blessed with a substantial stock of social capital. In the first place, networks of civic engagement foster sturdy norms of generalized reciprocity and encourage the emergence of social trust. Such networks facilitate coordination and communication, amplify reputations, and thus allow dilemmas of collective action to be resolved. (…) Finally, dense networks of interaction probably broaden the participants' sense of self, developing the 'I' into the 'we', or (in the language of rational-choice theorists) enhancing the participants' 'taste' for collective benefits.*" (Putnam, 1995, p. 67)

But Putnam does not explain exactly how the 'I' transmutes into a 'we'; in place, "Bowling Alone" reviews the decline. Its first manifestation is the diminishing number of memberships; according to Putnam, new, less formal types of association are not acceptable substitutes: they do not connect persons but checkbooks; idem for foundations or support groups: too specialized. Do we have to conclude that only face-to-face relationships with no intent are able to produce social capital?

[2] See Kennedy et al. (1998); on the general effects of social capital on health, see Kawachi (1997), who tells a story, again, starting in Italy… In the domain, not everyone agrees with an explanation in terms of social capital, see for example Pearce & Smith (2003).

To explain the decline, Putnam has four main leads: women's participation to the labor market (could explain the decline in PTA memberships, in the number of Red-Cross volunteers, and in the frequency of BBQs); growing mobility (people moving too fast to have the time to "re-pot" - but Putnam does not elaborate on the reasons for these itchy feet); various demographic changes (among them, curiously, small shops replaced with supermarkets then *e*-commerce); and at last, new technologies, mostly those that have led to a privatization of leisure: TV sets and VCR provide at home for what people could find only outside in the good old times, and do leave no time to socialize. The preferred leads are the demographic one (which makes "civic generations" disappear), and an excess of TV watching.

The media liked the story, but the thesis was much discussed: for some critics, Putnam sees decline where there are changes, other data show that there is no such a general decline, and also that all the trends don't go down; other critics wonder about the possibility of such an erosion in the United-States, in one generation, while social capital, if we are to believe the lessons of "Making democracy work" is so unbelievely rooted in the past (eg. Lemman, 1996; Ladd, 1996, 1998; Schudson, 1996; Minkoff, 1997; Paxton, 1999). And is the decline, if it exists, to be analyzed as a result of the exogeneous factors privileged by Putnam, or as the result of economic restructuring and social budget cuts (Foley & Edwards, 1997)? And was the high level of social capital before the fall a cause or an effect of the quality of the democracy and political organization (Skocpol, 1996)?

Very lively debate also about the conceptualization of social capital: cultural and exogeneous, or relational and endogeneous (Jackman & Miller, 1998)? Always a good for the whole society, or potentially harmful (Portes & Landolt, 1996; Durlauf, 1999)? Rooted in associative membership which produces trust, or rooted in trust which allows people to associate (Boix & Posner, 1996), measured by behaviors or measured by perceptions (Newton, 1997), quantitative or qualitative (Stolle & Rochon, 1998), club good or public good, attribute of the individuals or attribute of groups and communities (Portes, 1998)??

When added to the critics about "Making democracy work", it starts to make a lot. But almost none of these arguments will be taken into account by Putnam, with the exception of the "dark side", which will after be scrupulously mentionned - even though always minimized vs. the immense positive potential. In fact, the impressive bibliography in "Bowling Alone" 2000 doesn't mention any of the most critical articles.

"Bowling Alone" 2000 is basically an inflation of that of 1995 (a significant inflation, from 13 pages in 1995 to about 500 in 2000): it offers, in that order, a systematic description of the trends in political participation, membership in associations, religion, working relation, sociability, volunteering, philantropy, reciprocity, trustworthiness and trust), a search for the causes of the decline, and a review of the effects of social capital in various domains (education and children well-being, public order and security, economic prosperity, health, hapiness, democracy, etc. - and one chapter on the "dark side").

Putnam proposes also what seems to be a slightly revised version of his definition, since he puts almost the same ingredients but in a different order, and that he does not immediately attaches the positive outcomes:

“*Just as a screwdriver (physical capital) or a college education (human capital) can increase productivity (both individual and collective), so too social contacts affect the productivity of individuals and groups. Whereas physical capital refers to properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.*“ (Putnam, 2000, p. 18-19).

But if puting the ingredients in a different order shows how Putnam’s conception of social capital has evolved, the main conceptual innovation is somewhere else, in the explicit distinction of two forms, “bonding” and “bridging” of social capital: the first one develops within, the second one between, groups. One remaining mystery is that of the creation of the “bridging” type of social capital: it cannot result from repeated interactions within groups’ members, since it applies to the between-groups space; the spillover theory might be a bit weak here. Anyway, since data do not allow to measure each type separately -and that there are no clear indications of how to sort out ex-ante the good one from the bad one- the discussion can’t go very much farther.

The problem is that measurement is crucial: it’s by measuring social capital that Putnam shows its erosion in general; and it’s by measuring it that he shows that the States endowed (or, as in Putnam 1995, “*blessed*”) with high stocks of it have better results in many subjects. The measure he uses consists in a synthetic index (p. 291), sort of an average of 14 indicators combining individual responses and aggregated data grouped under 5 rather intuitive “dimensions”:

- Measures of community organizational life: served on local organization, in some club, ratio of civic and social organizations per 1000 pers., mean number of club meetings attended, mean number of group membership;
- Measures of engagement in public affairs: turnout in presidential elections, attended public meetings;
- Measures of community volunteerism: number of nonprofit organizations per 1000 pers., mean number of times worked on a community project, mean number of times did volutnter;
- Measures of informal sociability: agree with “spend a lot of time visiting friends”, mean number of times entertained at home;
- Measures of social trust: agree that “most people can be trusted”, “most people are honest”.

Curiously enough, the index opposes the States in the North - high level of the index - to those of the South…does it ring a bell? But what Putnam insists on is the correlation (in the right way) found between the level of the index (*i.e.* the value of the “stock” of social capital ?) and various good results such as better schools, less time spent watching TV, less crime, tax fraud, physical violence, better health, higher tolerance and greater happiness. Social capital has even some incredible effects that the “surprising facts” displayed on “bowlingalone.com” hardly exemplify; for instance, the health outcome from moving to a high social capital State would be comparable to that of quiting smoking (p.328). If only people knew!

Putnam concludes logically to the need for a general mobilization in order to rebuild the lost stocks of social capital. How? By doing all that is possible to try and reconnect the Americans one and all. As Durlauf puts it (2002, p. 272), if any expert were to conclude a study on the horrors of war by “*recommending that governments act to ensure world peace, he would be understandably derided*”.

In a tragic way, the terrorist attacks of september 11, as well as the preparation of the american intervention in Afghanistan have resulted, if we are to believe Putnam, in a first step towards the right solution: as Pearl Harbour did in the past, these events contribute to a re-awakening of the right state of mind: feelings of belonging, of pride, the need to participate, to be involved in collective things (*cf.*

an Op-ed in *The New York Times*, oct. 2001). In a complementary investigation, issued in a short "Bowling together" (2002), Putnam underlines the recovery of the Americans' interest in public affairs, and also of their trust in their government, their institutions, and more generally in other people (except those coming from Arab countries). With all that, we are left with some questions (and some worries): first, it may seem surprising that terrorism leads the American to a greater level of trust in their government while it is the same government which couldn't prevent the terrorist attacks: what does exactly captures such a measure of "trust", and is it possible that trust results from repeated experiences and their positive outcomes? Second, it is puzzling that social capital can be at the same time so incredibly durable (in Italy, where the 14^{th} century explains the 20^{th}'s), and so incredibly volatile (in the United-States, where it erodes in one generation and starts to rebuild in a few months -but was it so much eroded, and is it sure that what's rebuilt is the same as what had supposedly disappeared?) The main lesson is perhaps that, whether the way it goes, it is always under the pressure of exogeneous factors.

1.3. Fukuyama: Trust as the one and only thing a country needs

Francis Fukuyama, the 3^{rd} main reference in the social capital literature, provides, with "Trust - The social virtues and the creation of prosperity" (1995), a very simple theory: a major lesson from the study of economic life is that a nation's capacity to develop the institutions that make it powerful and competitive depends on a quasi-natural ability of its population for trust; this ability is rooted in the values attached to its culture. With this rule, Fukuyama is able to divide the world in two parts: on one side, high-trust countries, and on the other, low-trust countries.

Germany, Japan, and until recently the United-States are the main examples of gifted countries, well endowed with a high ability for trust; on the opposite, Italy (especially the South), France, or even some ethnic minorities in the United-States (for example, African-Americans, who, Fukuyama says, "*have a lower-than-average rate of self-employment and small-business ownership*", p.297) suffer from their inability to trust, because their culture allows them to be trustful only on a small scale -that of the family-. In the first group of countries, the actors support one another because they believe that they form a community; in the second group, the actors are deprived of this communautarist inclination, and in consequence miss many economic opportunities; in short, they lack social capital. For Fukuyama, social capital depends on the norms and values shared within a community, and also on the willingness to subordinate individual interests to wider interests. Sharing values allow the actors to trust one another; trust, in turn, is "*the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest and cooperative behavior, based on commonly shared norms, on the part of other members of that community*" (p.26). Trust is what permits people to associate with others, and gives rise to social capital, which is the ability of people to work together for common purposes (a definition that Fukuyama attributes erroneously to Coleman…). Trust is the basis of a "spontaneous sociability" which also gives rise to the groups and organizations which form the "civil society" (to be understood as a set of intermediate institutions: clubs, churches and any other form of voluntary organization, including big private companies -intermediate meaning non-family non-government). Conceptually, it seems unnecessarily complicated: why the need for so many "concepts" (trust, social capital, spontaneous sociability, culture, etc.) when it seems that there's only one idea, repeated again and again?

In fact, most of "Trust" is dedicated to a description of high-trust vs. low-trust countries. To distinguish the former from the latter, Fukuyama uses a unique criterion: either there are many large private companies, and this allows to identify a high trust country, or there are mostly small-scale family-owned businesses, and it signals a low trust country. Fukuyama has some problems with irritating countries, such as Korea, whose culture is close to that of China (low-trust country), but whose economic performance is closer to that of a high-trust country; he solves the problem by attributing the economic success to a judicious state intervention. Then he has another problem, whith countries where the state intervention is supposed to be a restraint (such as in France): but he explains that not every state is able to make the right decisions. Another problem is that of the United-States: why a nation of such individualists would have reached such a level of economic development? According to Fukuyama, it is simply that in fact the American are not the individualists they themselves think they are; and the proof is that if they were, one would not observe the large companies that exist since the 19th century. But he admits that trust is declining in the United-States; it is because of state interventionism, which makes people depend on social services and benefits (and he seems particularly concerned with those allowances to women who raise children without a father at home). State intervention, that is when the state trespasses its basic role of enforcing property rights and preserving public order, is what is most destructive of social capital.

Less popular than Putnam, Fukuyama's "Trust" didn't go unremarked; in particular, its main thesis about the link between trust and economic performance. Solow will comment in a short paper (1995), explaining that a usual exercice in economics consists in decomposing growth in order to evaluate how different factors contribute to it. He underlines that very commonly at the end of the computation, there remains an unexplained share of growth, which accounts for the contribution of a residual. If Fukuyama were right, the contribution of this residual should be high in high-trust countries. Unfortunately, the empirical studies that Solow is aware of suggest mostly that high growth rates result firstly from a high level of investment and the growth of the labor force. Of course he says, one can always interpret it as an effect of social capital. But if it is so, it should be found that the contribution of this residual is higher in high-trust countries; and it is not so: for example, the contribution of the residual to growth has been greater in France than in Japan. Solow also wonders why a given country displays, by industry, such uneven performances: if social capital were a key factor, why its "magic" does operate only selectively? And by the way, what is this "capital" made of, how can its flows, stocks and retruns be identified? Solow, if he does not concludes that Fukuyama doesn't make any sense, remains in the end very skeptical: "*I do not wish to contradict Fukuyama's judgment about American civil society (…) But imprecision is not a virtue, and 'for example' is not an argument. Academic social science is often narrow and boring, but it tends to root out vagueness and inconclusive argumentation*" (1995, p. 39).

Yet it is possible to credit Fukuyama for the provision of the most straightforward way to measure social capital, on the basis of a single information: the proportion of people who think that "most people can be trusted". But is such an indicator of much use for public policy? Given the conceptualization, probably not: trust being of cultural essence, it would be difficult to implement policy measures that make it change within a reasonable length of time.

At the end of this review[3], two competing conceptualizations emerge: in the first one, social capital tends to be conceived as endogeneous, closely linked with civic engagement, in the form of voluntary association where trust and reciprocity are learned then generalized to the whole society. In the second one, social capital would be rather exogeneous, a quasi-innate ability rooted in culture and traditions, which allows people to associate. Both refer to Coleman's theorization, but both stretch it to an aggregated level absent from Coleman's approach. Both underline its benign effects at this level, but neither suggest that its creation could have a cost.

These approaches also mobilize a great number of notions: networks, trust, norms, reciprocity, and also values, culture, involvement, participation, honesty, trustworthiness, civil society, institutions, groups, communities - to list the most frequent. Some refer to behaviors, some refer to perceptions, but they also involve structures and contexts. The main difficulty is then to combine them together, in one logical articulation. Do empirical studies help?

2- Empirical studies

There have been many empirical studies, trying to assess the impact of social capital on so many things (school performance, health, mortality, crime, institutionnal efficiency, growth and economic development, etc.) that the point is almost reached where social capital will have been tested on any and every social or economic fact. In what follows, we have choosen to focus on two studies: one on the effect of social capital on democracy, the other on its impact on economic performance.

2.1. Social capital and democracy: which causal way?

Paxton (2002) explicitly addresses the question of the causal way between social capital and democracy. In theory, several mechanisms may operate: on the one hand, social capital can help in the advent of democracy, by providing a space for discussion, opposition and information; resistance movements can develop through networks (either formal or informal - as in Coleman's Korean students example). It can also help to keep a democracy healthful, by encouraging people to participate in political life. On the other hand, it is also possible that democracy acts in favour of social capital development, since it allows for more freedom -especially freedom of association. Paxton envisages at first the possibility that social capital and democracy are in fact interdependent. She then tries to verify whether all the types of associations result in the same effects.

[3] Which does not cover the literature emanating from the World Bank (see Ponthieux, 2003).

She measures social capital on the basis of the World Values survey data -WVS after- (46 countries in 1990) and that of the International Yearbook of Organizations -IYO after- (more than 100 countries). The WVS gives her two social capital variables: the mean number of association memberships (including volunteering, and an indicator of trust (from the standard WVS question "*Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?*"). Being centered on industrialized and democratic countries, the WVS data may be biased, more than with the IYO, then the interest to use the two sets of data. Paxton measures democracy on a scale going from 0 up to 100, based on the electoral rights index[4]. A comparison of this index for the 46 countries of the WVS and the 100 countries of the IYO confirms the bias: democracy scores at 81 on average for the first group (the standard deviation is 22), and at 56 (sdt. dev of 38) for the second group.

Using a model of cross-lagged effects, her first results, with the WVS, show that democracy has a significant impact on both indicators for social capital, but that the reversal is not true. With the IYO, the results show also an impact of democracy on social capital, but also a significant effect of social capital on democracy. This would confirm the standard theory, according to which causality goes from social capital to democracy; but all results considered, it is not possible to deny that it also goes the other way, that is the two phenomenon would be interdependent.

To her second question, whether different types of associations have the same effect, the answer is no. Paxton distinguishes between isolated and connected associations. Associations are said connected if their members are at the same time members in other associations. Isolated associations are those whose members are member in only one association; this is the case in three types of associations: trade unions, sports associations and religious associations. Her results show that connected associations have a strong positive and significant effect on democracy while isolated associations have a strong negative and significant impact. Added to the fact that the coefficients are of comparable size, she concludes that the impact of the two types of associations cancel each other out. But she also finds that the causality works well in the other way: democracy has a positive impact on both type of associations.

Her last question deals with the combination of the effects of trust and associative life. She finds a positive and significant crossed-effect, when direct effects are negative; she concludes that it is because of trust that associational life appears to have a positive effect in other specifications.

2.2. Social capital and economic performance.

One of the best known empirical studies about the impact of social capital on the economy is that of Knack & Keefer "Does social capital have an economic payoff?" (1997). They compare 21 countries in order to answer three questions: 1) what is the relationship between trust, civic cooperation and economic performance; 2) is it Putnam's or Olson's hypothesis that works best?; 3) which are the determinants of trust and civic cooperation?

[4] This index is applies the definition from the Freedom House; for details http://www.freedomhouse.org.

A country's economic performance is measured by the growth of per capita income, and of the investment rate. Social capital is approached with three variables from the WVS in 1981 and 1991:

- trust, measured as in Paxton; but Knack & Keefer remark that the formulation "most people" is ambiguous: which people in which contex? They admit that the same answer may mean different things for different people. The mean of the variable is 35,8% and the standard deviation 14%.

- norms of civic cooperation, measured by a score (which can go up to 50 points); the score is built on five items which are the opinions about whether some behaviors can always/never/sometimes be justified, among: claiming benefits you're not entitled to, avoiding a fare on public transport, cheating on taxes, keeping money found, and failing to report accidental damage caused to a parked vehicle. The score is 39,4 on average, but varies only slightly between countries: the standard deviation is only of 2. Compared with that of "trust", it could indicate that people are reluctant to admit that they are not always perfectly honest, more than they are to state that the others are not always perfectly honest.

These first two variables are used to answer their first question; they find that trust as well as civic cooperation have a positive impact on the economic performance; the result would support Fukuyama's thesis.

To answer their second question, they use a third variable which is a measure of the density of associational life: the mean number of memberships per capita. The variable seems at first to have no effect either on the growth rate or the investment rate. But it is very heterogeneous, and Knack & Keefer break it down into two categories, opposing "putnam-esque" to "olsonian" associations (rent-seeking organizations). In the latter category, trade unions, political parties and professional associations; in the former all the other sorts. None of these categories has a significant impact on growth, and even, they find that "*Perversely, 'Putnam' groups appear to harm investment*." (p. 1274). The results do not vary if religious associations are excluded from the "putnam-esque" category, and political parties from the "olsonian" category. Knack & Keefer wonder whether "putnam" associations, rather than indicating how much people are involved in interactions that can result in trust and cooperative behaviors, wouldn't capture after all a population's taste for leisure.

In a last part of the paper, they explore some possible determinants of trust or civic cooperation: associational participation, income inequalities, social polarization, the strenght of formal institutions for protecting property and contracts rights, per capita income and education rates. They find that, once the income and education level are taken into account, associational participation in horizontal structures has no impact either on trust or civic cooperation. If they use the same dichotomy as previously between "olsonian" and "putnam-esque" groups, it's rather the oslonian type which seems associated with higher levels of trust or civic cooperation, while the "putnam" groups seem to have no effect on trust, and rather a negative effect on civic cooperation. Income inequalities always have a strong negative effect on the two dependent variables, and the capacity of the institutions to protect private property and contract rights always has a positive effect. The effect of secondary education is always positive. Social polarization (proxied by income inequality and ethnic homogeneity) has mostly a negative impact on the measures of social capital; and at last, religion seems to have a negative impact when there are significant shares of catholics or moslems.

All in all, these results tend to rebut Putnam’s main hypothesis of positive effects of the density of associationnal life and horizontal networks; besides, their analysis of crossed-effects suggests that the mechanics works in a different way than that supposed either by Putnam or by Fukuyama: trust or civic cooperation may have a significant impact on economic performances, but this impact is greater when income inequalities are relatively small, the institutions are strong, the education level is high, and the society is homogeneous rather than polarized.

The two studies that the main results are sumarized above finally tend to show, at first, that the two conceptualizations of social capital (in short trust vs. civic engagement) are not equivalent. Turning to more empirical studies would only reinforce this conclusion; for example, Costa & Kahn (2001), who study the evolution of the various “dimensions” of social capital, show that they do not vary in the same way or range.

A second conclusion would be that the effect of associational participation is far from being verified, and that’s a dig at Putnam’s standard theory. Yet there is another often cited study, that of Narayan & Pritchett (1997), which showed a strong and significant impact of associational density on the income level; but these results, obtained from the comparison of rural villages in Tanzania, have prooved to be hard to generalize.

The effects of trust seem to be more often validated, but it contradicts results obtained in other studies than those presented above; for example, La Porta et al. (1997) found only a weak correlation between trust and growth, but a strong correlation between trust and institutional efficiency. It is true that a second look at their study leads to question the relevance and reliability of the results, since they relate a measure of trust in 1990 and various performances, some of which measured on earlier years: the effect happens before the cause. Helliwell (1996) for his part, shows that for some countries, trust may have a negative impact on growth (measured for productivity - and there again, the measure of trust is more recent than that of the economic performance).

Beyond the details of the studies, what appears also clearly when one looks at more emprirical studies is that different authors attach different meanings to a given indicator (religion for instance may be taken as an indicator of shared norms, or as an indicator of a specific structure of relationships); it also goes the other way, since different authors use different proxies as measures of the same aspect of social capital (as in the studies presented above, where the dichotomy between connected and isolated associations by Paxton overlap only partly with the distinction by Knack & Keefer between “putnamian” and “olsonian” groups, even though the conceptual reference is the same). To finish, it also appears that a given measure of social capital does not result in a same outcome according to the level of the analysis: if we give to the results of empirical studies as much credit as their authors do, the strenght of family ties improves the creation of human capital at the individual level (as in Coleman’s approach), but has a negative impact on macroeconomic performance (as in La Porta et al.’s results), while the aggregated level of human capital has a positive impact on this performance. Idem with associational participation, which plays positively at a village level (Narayan & Pritchett) -or even at a regional level (Putnam), but not at a more aggregated level (Knack & Keefer). The same problems are encountered when complementary indicators are mobilized: for example, a given religion -catholic- has a strongly positive impact, according to Coleman (1988), on the creation of human capital (but does it play as a relational resource or as a moral value?), but a strongly negative impact on a country's economic growth. At the same time, it is easy to understand why a given cause can have various effects according to the level of analysis: for instance, the same strong norms that may lower transaction costs within a context can play as as many entry barriers which limit or cancel out this benefit at a more aggregated level; the same rules which inhibit deviant behaviors can inhibit also various innovative activities, and, more genrally, freedom.

But there are nevertheless two regularities to be found in the empirical studies: first, the results always show a significant impact of inequalities -as soon as the authors have taken any indicator of them among their explaining variables-; second, about the explaining variables precisely, one is conspicuous by its absence: there's never an indicator of any social or economic policy (while information about, at least, the budget share of social expenditure is very easy to obtain for a great number of countries): it is simply as if it were not part of the subject, while one can think that it could, at least, enhance the efficiency of social capital…

Coming back to the inconclusive results of empirical work, one have to recognize that it could also result from technical difficulties: small samples size, measurement errors, acrobatic performances to fill in missing information and poor data, all this can play a role. And this is also why it is so easy to charge that if social capital tests fail, it is because of these problems. But not everyone agrees with this excuse; Dasgupta for example, writes: "*it [social capital] is fiendishly difficult to measure. This is not because of a recognised paucity of data, but because we don't quite know what we should be measuring.*" (Dasgupta, 2000, p.4).

3 - The measurement of social capital: why, what and how?

What is the rationale for social capital measurement? At the starting point, there is obviously the aim of prooving it; that's what empirical work is for. The (at best) inconclusive results, are first attributed to measurement imperfections: if social capital is so difficult to measure, it is not because of conceptual flaws, but because of poor or unreliable data. Beyond the fact that it is amazing to see how late the question of measurement appears, since social capital rhetorics is mostly based on the thesis of a decline of the "stock" or "level" of social capital, it is amazing that, at the time when the measurement question appears and is set up as an emergency - given measurement is so much lagging behind theory-, it is eluded right away: rather than opening on more thought or discussion about what is to be measured, it ends in efforts to make internationally comparable what was already (poorly) measured.

That's exactly how the Oecd started to deal with social capital measurement: on the basis of a working definition and a list of indicators (both closely inspired from Putnam's), the program was to set up international guidelines in order to produce harmonized indicators. The precise meaning of these indicators, the fact that some of them appear to have at best ambiguous effects, their general meaning at an aggregated level didn't matter; as remarked in the report of the 2002 conference work, not reaching to an agreement about the meaning of such or such indicator does not prevent from discussing of the better way to measure it: "*For example, one might debate whether trust is part of social capital or its outcome without adressing the issue of how measuring trust.*" (Oecd, "Next steps in international measurement"). Where all this leads is another question. But perhaps more interesting, the concept of social capital that the whole enterprise validates is that of Putnam's, even though it is the conceptualization which empirical work tends to show mostly the weakness.

How did the measurement enterprise work? Since measurement has to be based on a definition, the Oecd provided one: "*Networks, together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups*.". A list of indicators was also provided, as a basis for discussion. These indicators were grouped into three "dimensions": formal networks, informal networks, and trust. The information was to be collected by individual surveys: the implicit assumption is therefore that social capital, conceptualized as a collective attribute, can be measured by the aggregation, up to the right level, of individual responses relating to behaviors or perceptions, therefore indiscriminate once aggregated, to contexts or motivation.

From the definition of social capital to its measurement, there is an interesting reduction: first, networks are broken down into "formal" and "informal". The "Formal networks" dimension contains indicators of participation in associations, clubs, political parties, trade unions, churches, etc. and of voluntary work in these organizations. The "Informal networks" include measures of sociability and provision/reception of unpaid help. If one tries to interpret these indicators, it is obvious that they are likely to capture various things within each dimension; for instance, on the side of "formal networks", it is not the same thing to measure the number of memberships, or the frequency of attending meeting or events, or the time spent in participation, or the motivation for joining one group or the other. It is probable that motivation has to be put aside, since it is the only way to make sense of the addition of associations which may have competing goals (eg. workers trade unions *vs*. empoyers' organizations). On the side of "informal networks", there could be some ambiguities too, for example the indicators of unpaid help can be taken as indicators of connections as well as indicators of the outcomes of these connections. And there may also be a problem in the absence of a definition of a connection: is saying "hello" from time to time to a neighboor, which takes about five seconds, a connection, or does it have to happen every day to be considered as such? Anyway, these questions are out of the question since the aim is not to know what is measured, but how to count.

Second, the measurement of the "norms, values and understandings" of the definition, more difficult to objectivize, lead to measure something else: "trust" dimension. The Oecd justifies the shift, arguing that trust is actually a proxy for all these notions, and can be considered at the same time as a source and an outcome of social capital, and as a substitute for many norms, understandings and values which underpin social cohesion (Oecd, 2001, p.47). Put in other words, trust is, results in, and results from social capital; one may have the feeling of going round in circles, but it is helpful for measurement, and "trust", absent from the working definition, comes back as the third dimension. It is a good bargain, since there's already a "standard" question on trust in the WVS.

Beyond the three dimensions, the Oecd suggested to think about other indicators, for example in order to distinguish between "bonding" and "bridging" social capital, or to include measures of virtual networks, with respect to the development of ITCs. The list also proposes indicators of political participation and indicators of well-being. Would that be to ensure also harmonized measures of some outcomes?

One of the pitfalls of this approach to measurement is that, even though in the end a list of internationally harmonized indicators could actually be issued, it hardly solves the doubts about their meaning. And there's also the question of what is to be learned from them: as many studies have shown, it's known from quite a time that deficits in sociability, participation in associations or in elections, and even lack of trust are more likely to be observed for populations who, maybe, lack of social capital, but more certainly lack of education, jobs and, at least relatively, of financial resources. Measurement, making social capital exist as a quantity, but unable to make it exist as a capital -not to say to explain where it comes from-, may well end in implementing a sreen of smoke in place of already known, but less attractive, explanations.

Conclusion

The views expressed in this paper can seem harsh, and one may prefer to argue that the concept is still in its youth, and that the efforts engaged since the end of the 1990s will end, with the help of improvements in both conceptualization and measurement, in the emergence of regular and robust empirical results. But it may also end in results taken too easily as satisfying, if, as according to Grootaert & van Bastelaer (2001, p.9) the challenge is as follows: "*The measurement challenge is to identify a contextually relevant indicator of social capital and to establish an empirical correlation with relevant benefit indicator*". Given such expectations, it is very likely that social capital will be empirically verified, and it would even be rather logical: amalgamating so many notions, so many processes, and so many possible outcomes, it would be incredible that some empirical correlations cannot be obtained.

Then why was it so important to hurry into internationally harmonized measurement? It may be because of the combination of three factors: scientific expectations, efficient lobbying and, its consequence, policymakers' demand for social capital indicators.

An illustration of scientific expectations can be found in Paldam (2000), for whom what is at stake is that either there is actually a "fire behind the smoke", and the "social capital dream" comes true: "*The social capital dream is that social capital is a robust concept. If social capital is as important as suggested, it is likely that all or most of the different definitions stand on some 'underlying rock', so that everything deals with aspects of the same story*" (p. 631); or there's nothing (which doesn't mean that the various notions and concepts mobilized within the metaphor "social capital" are not themselves important and robust), and then social capital is not of any conceptual interest. If social capital is as important as supposed, the choice of one definition rather than the other is not crucial; but if the concept is weak, the definition is of first importance, "*but then, social capital is unlikely to be something useful*" (id.). Then it's a nightmare, since if every time social capital is used, it has to be re-defined according to the question addressed, the level of the analysis and maybe the data at hand, it will remain a big shapeless carry-all.

To scientific expectations is adding the pressure of an efficient lobbying, as a visit to the "Saguaro seminar" website, a Putnam's initiative, confirms. Three reasons are invoked for the need of a measurement:

> "***a)*** *Measurement helps make the concept of social capital more tangible for people who find social capital difficult or abstract;* ***b)*** *It increases our investment in social capital: in a performance-driven era, social capital will be relegated to second-tier status in the allocation of resources, unless organizations can show that their community-building efforts are showing results; and* ***c)*** *Measurement helps funders and community organizations build more social capital.(…)*" (http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/saguaro, page "SC Measurement").

Well beyond a scientific approach, the view promoted here is that social capital exists, and that it has to be revealed to those who don't know it, or who don't trust it…

Pressure also plays, in a seemingly pragmatic perspective, through the argument that it is urgent to know whether social capital is good or bad: "*The evidence supports the arguments that social capital can be used to promote or to undermine the public good (…) practitionners and policymakers cannot wait for researchers to know all there is to know before acting*" (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000, p.243). All this leads to demands for social capital indicators. The lobbying was successful, and social capital, victim of its promises, has now to be put into indicators that policymakers can use: "*If social capital cannot be measured, policymakers will not have a 'dashboard' to judge where they need to be intervening or to assess how well they are doing*." (Halpern, 2002, p.35). Beyond Putnam's (and others') admonestations, the interest in social capital has also been boosted by the recent context in the United-States; as Hudson & Chapman (*in* Oecd 2002, "Country papers") write: "*Within the two past years, a convergence of events has further motivated government interest in measuring the concept of social capital more directly. First, the publication of Robert Putnam's book 'Bowling Alone' in 2000 (...). Second, the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001*."

The various expectations about social capital are in themselves astonishing when put together with what's visible of the operational scope of the dominant conceptualization; because if one look at it thoroughly, the theory is mostly a tautology, assessing that groups of individuals who have a high propensity to cooperate, or a high propensity to trust each other, will achieve common goals more easily than those who are not gifted with these skills. Beyond the emptiness of the assessment, the conceptualization doesn't explain how what works on a small scale (that of a group) works also at on a larger scale (that of several groups).

So what makes social capital so attractive? The beginning of an explanation can be found in the context of its emergence, at the beginning of the 1990s in the United-States; in short, one of the highest poverty rates among industrialized countries, social polarization at a level exemplified by the phenomenon of "gated cities", massive budget cuts, workfare replacing welfare, etc. As many authors have underlined, the supposed powers of social capital -as promoted by Putnam- of transmuting 'I' into 'we', may have appeared as a miracle remedy to solve deep social problems, and ease the experts' charitable minds, particularly since it is apparently costless (and firstly, not requiring higher taxes). As it's been said, Putnam struck a nerve; but what struck was not the problems he pointed out, it was the way he offered to solve them, easily, and the widely acceptable explanation he gave of the origin of these problems: exogeneous causes.

Yet in the rest of the world, this contextual background doesn't suffice to explain how readily the concept has been spread and accepted. It is perhaps that the last decade has been a time of discussion and doubts about economic policy and regulation, which in Europe lead to what is probably best illustrated by the UK's so-called "third way". The "third way" is a political project whose main word is "responsibilty" (cf. Blair, 2002): it's the "welfare-society", as opposed to the welfare state, *i.e.* "a post-modern social order based on policies aimed at involving and activating civil society" (Jobert, 2002, p. 411 - my translation). It results in proposals that are alternative in many ways: between left and right wing, between the state and the market, as if these traditional "ways" were invalidated under the pressure of globalization (another fuzzy word, by the way) on one side, and the rise of new concerns - such as justice, ethics, the environment, sustainability and so on. Interestingly enough, social capital is itself caught between many things: between micro and macro, between cause and effect, between economics and sociology, between individualism and holism, between private and public, and perhaps even between good and bad. To come back to the question of a search for alternative models, it can be illustrated also in many academic work, looking for pluri-disciplinarity, highlighting the multi-dimensionality of many economic and social realities, and pointing out the limits of old models (for example, in economics, new growth theories, market failures, etc.). In the end, many factors contribute to create a space where "new" ideas can develop and appear as good ideas. Curiously, these new ideas are often very simple -the "good sense"-; very often too, they rest on the values of the past, the illusion of a vanished golden age, ingredients that can be found in the social capital discourse; the result is that it carries the reassuring idea of a latent order, from which society may leave the rails from time to time, but that can be re-established… if everyone does his/her share.

I would argue that the analytical contribution is very small: social capital literature does not shed light on any phenomenon that is not already known, and definitions, firstly that of Putnam, pile up notions without saying how they are to be combined, without building anything robust, stuck as social capital is between being a simplistic unique cause of too many things, and a mutlidimensional thing. According to Dasgupta, the notions amalgamated in social capital are useful for what they are, and there's no reason to take them for something else: "*In an early definition, social capital was identified with those 'features of social organization, such as trust, norms and networks' (…). As a characterization, this appears beguiling, but it suffers from a weakness : it encourages us to amalgamate incommensurable objects, namely (and in that order) beliefs, behavioural rules, and such forms of capital assets as interpersonal links, without offering a hint as to how they are to be amalgamated. One of my aims is to suggest that they can't be amalgamated (…) this would imply that we must study them separately if we are to understand what they are about and how they are related*" (Dasgupta, 2000, p. 5).

Is it, at last, possible to rescue social capital, and credit the concept (its "standard theory") with its potential for encouraging and provoking debates and discussion? It would be difficult to say no, given the impressive amount of papers, conferences and books in about ten years. But, as social capital itself, this potential has a downside: whatever the question addressed, there's one and only answer, which turns down any other. Along the road of proselytism, social capital becomes a universal explanation which leaves no room for any alternative, and in fact, except in critical articles, it is not confronted with any other. And since it is bombarded without any reference to other capitals (economic, cultural and symbolic) or to inequalities in power, since it is buried within a discourse of the good and the bad, never dealing with conflicting interests or conflict, it contributes firstly to confuse issues, especially with regard to the study of causes and consequences of disparate living conditions, inequalities in education, in capital, in power, and in opportunities.

Social capital, in the version of it which dominates since the beginning of the 1990s, is finally not of great importance. It is not because the concepts and approaches which it borrows from are not themselves of great importance, it is precisely the opposite. In the end, social capital does not contribute to a better understanding of what it pretends to explain, and leads only to a single, and useless, prescription.

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