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‘A Thousand Points of Spite’ – Crowding Out the Bridging Community

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Abstract: Now as in the past, studies of community are lacking in their analysis of structural factors that influence communities. Theoretical analysis of community lacks regard for structure and agency. I suggest that Bourdieu’s theory of practice and Honeth’s ideas concerning recognition provide mechanism and motivation to address the structure and agency conflict, and inform more sophisticated studies of community. Communities are best served when the practices by which they operate are generalised and inclusive in nature, thus maximising interaction between people of difference and multiplying pathways of recognition. Such communities are characterised by norms of generalised trust and networks of bridging social capital. However, corrosive global structural forces – materialism, inequality and changing household dynamics – pose challenges to such communities. I propose that such forces ‘crowd out’ generalised bridging capital in favour of more particularised bonding capital. Bonding, premised on rational-calculation, is easier to maintain than widespread norms of trust when agents are set adrift from structural support. A few societies provide the support – in the form of universal welfare – to counteract the global structural forces. The rest are subject to increasing bonding and particularisation, and a loss of the recognition that stems from maintaining a tolerant, open and trusting community.

Introduction

I have spoken of a thousand points of light, of all the community organizations that are spread like stars throughout the Nation ... duty, sacrifice, commitment, and a patriotism that finds its expression in taking part and pitching in. - George Bush, Inaugural Address, Friday January 20, 1989

The above quote by George Bush senior sums up recent resurgences in interest in civic community and social capital. It reflects the notion that unacknowledged voluntary efforts should be recognised and gratified, if not paid for. It also masks a great contention. Some believe it is right to harness the power of volunteers, seeing ‘natural’ pathways of association as the best mechanism for delivery of services (Norton 1997). A

growing number of commentators, however, see efforts to encourage volunteering and integrate voluntary activity into state provision as a means to cut costs, and avoid or even wind-back provision of services, turning volunteerism into a mandatory ‘mutual obligation’ (Tomlinson 2004). Even the most prominent researchers into civic society suggest that volunteerism in place of welfare is “*an ideological fig-leaf for an administration that used the thinness of our public wallet as an alibi for a lack of political will.*” (Putnam 1993: p7)

I suggest that much contention stems from ignorance as to the base principles of sociology, structure and agency. Community has been popularised within civic society literature past (Almond and Verba 1963; Jacobs 1961) and present (Putnam 2000) through avoiding the theoretical subtleties other disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, and even economics bring to community studies. This paper engages in brief reviews of a fairly extensive range of such theories applicable to community. It focuses upon trust and recognition as central cohesive elements within communities, and attempts to situate them within wider concerns over structure and agency. The result will be a more sophisticated picture of modern communities.

Structure and Agency

I start with a few brief explanations. A basic definition of structure is of ‘*institutionalised social arrangements [including] rules and resources implicated in the reproduction of social systems*’ (Jary and Jary 1991: 635). The concept of structure is essential to

sociology in capturing the very real presence of social inertia; that part of society that is fixed and largely beyond the power of agents to alter. The persistence of religious forms (Durkheim 1961), political and bureaucratic systems (Weber 1948), and the capitalist system of production (Marx and Engels 1967), are all classic examples of structure. Structure shapes society and the actions of individuals, voluntary or otherwise. However, structural perspectives have been criticised for leaving little room for human initiative. There is a need for the concept of agency – here defined as ‘*any human action, collective or structural as well as individual, which makes a difference to a social outcome*’ (Jary and Jary 1991: 10) – to balance structure. Classical depictions of agency simplified the social world down to the motivations of individuals, whereby actors were either reluctant consorts to community seeking to avoid punishment (Hobbes 1968), or enterprising pursuers of the esteem of their fellows (Rousseau 1968). But more modern works in social psychology (Mead 1934) acknowledge the dual role of individuals and societies have in forming each other through symbolism and signs. Cooley coined this ‘the looking-glass’ of other’s perceptions (Cooley 1962). Such depictions fed the various ‘interactionist’ perspectives (Goffman 1959; Schutz 1972) that helped to counter the lack of freedom, purpose and resistance prevalent in structuralist theory.

However, the conflict between structure and agency perspectives has allowed economic individualised models of human action to gain predominance in theory and eventually policy (Woolcock and Narayan 2000) and structural issues have become understated. The consequence of ignoring structural influence is severe. Even communitarians such as

Putnam have come around to accepting the importance of examining global macro-phenomenon and their influence upon community (Putnam 2002). There is a need to elaborate on efforts that to some degree have succeeded in cutting through the structure and agency conflict, so as to properly inform community debates.

Practice and Recognition

I suggest that two recent developments in theory are of use in bridging the divide between structure and agency. Firstly there is the theory of practice, from Giddens and Bourdieu. Giddens (1979) notes that the practices of agents shape structures along limited pathways, through a process called ‘structuration’; though he does not suggest how agents do this and what resources they use. Bourdieu (1986) gives a better depiction, noting that practices are largely unconscious, and as they become more fixed and rigid with the passage of time, they take on capital-like properties. Practices become cumulative and tradable. Agents thus build up agency through trade in such practice-based capital; the most common of which is the practice of association, or *social capital*.

The second theoretical development is in the philosophy of recognition. Philosophers assert the importance of preserving ‘difference’ in order to maintain both community and the self (Blanchot 1988; Benhabib 1992; Nancy 1991), as assimilation of difference destroys the ‘other’ against which an individual defines himself (through a process of definition by opposition). Tolerance and acceptance of difference become vital to

building up both individual's and community's capacities for recognition. Such a perspective is captured in the sociology of Axel Honeth (1997), who suggests recognition stems from certain universal human aspects – love, rights and solidarity – but notes these aspects can back conflict. For example, persons may focus upon the bonds associated with love – for one's family or local community – to the exclusion of those associated with solidarity, in that they justify a rejection of the larger society on the basis of protecting their family or neighbours. Recognition is accumulated within “*a growing circle of partners to communication*.” (Honeth 1992: 89), like capital, but may cohere either within limited groups or across the whole of civic society universally. It is important then to be aware of capital in terms of how it is distributed, the structural factors that shape such distributions, and whether such distributions contain sufficient openness and tolerance to indeed secure a maximum of recognition for communities. I turn now thus to examine the foremost aspect underlying social capital – trust – and the potential structural influences that may effect it.

Trust and Bridging

Trust spans both structure and agency. Political scientists suggest trust is a strict norm, culturally and historically derived and beyond the ability of individuals to shape and engineer (Fukayama 1995; Putnam 2000); however they lack explanations for why trust changes and decline, as it appears to be doing in a number of countries (Inglehart 1999). If trust is a norm, it is highly vulnerable to structural influence. Luhman (1979) notes that the increasing social complexity characteristic of modern times erodes trust. He notes that

trust arises under conditions of uncertainty to facilitate communal action, which suggests that trust for him is a normative-emotional construct, compensating for a lack rather than dependent upon information and rational decision-making (Barbalet 1998).

Paradoxically, however, trust is also a product of information, a consequence of the rational-calculation of agents. Economists see trust as a rational construct (Dasgupta 1988), as depicted in reiterated ‘prisoners dilemma’ scenarios. Here, repeated interaction increases information concerning rewards from cooperating, as well as sanctions from failing to cooperate with another, and renders trust a rational action. Some sociologists see a balance between rational choice and norms, with some such as Coleman (1990) suggesting we rationally trust on the basis of information concerning the normative sanctions and rewards of our society. Others deny rational choice, suggesting we must trust *because we lack* information, concerning others and the modern, uncertain society in which we live (Luhman 1979). This indicates a contradiction in trust, in that in a social sense, it can be related both positively and negatively to information.

I suggest from this that there are two kinds of trust, linked to Eric Uslaner’s distinction between *generalised* and *particularised* trust (Uslaner 1999). Generalised trust is normative, and related to tolerance, acceptance and faith in others; it is linked negatively to information in that subscribers to this kind of trust may trust in a ‘moral’ sense, above and beyond what their rational calculations tell them is appropriate (Mansbridge 1999). It is steeped in tolerance, and therefore is the prime source of the recognition that

individuals crave and communities thrive under. However, being normative, it also susceptible to structural forces and influences; it can be influenced and eroded like capital. Particularised trust on the other hand is more related to agency, linked to specific experiences people have concerning other people (Uslaner 2002), and is linked positively to information, in terms of the expected sanction and rewards expected from associating and trusting those specific others. Within social capital literature, particularised and generalised trust has been linked to the two familiar dimensions of *bonding* and *bridging* respectively (Putnam 2000).

I suggest then that bonding is based on rational-process particularised trust, closed networks, and limited (potentially informal) volunteering. It bears the closest relation to agency; and in communities where agency is promoted whilst structural concerns are ignored, it will come to predominate. Bridging capital on the other hand encompasses moral-normative generalised trust, open networks, and civic volunteering. It interacts strongly with structural forces. Friction between bonding and bridging networks has been identified in critiques of social capital (Portes and Landolt 1996). However, I am suggesting a new and radical scale at which this occurs; that *global structural conditions are crowding out civil society itself, replacing bridging with bonding capital*. A competitive, globalised, uncertain world in which supportive welfare is diminishing contributes strongly to changing the very nature of social capital from generalised, risk preferring, tolerant and inclusive bridging capital to particularised, risk adverse, and exclusive bonding capital. I look at such conditions and their outcome next.

Global Structure and Local Welfare

Putnam (2002) identifies technological change, welfare and inequality, and changing socio-demographics as potential global influences upon community and social capital. These global trends relate to numerous structural corrosives to community and quality of life from the literature, including television (Putnam 2000), work organisation, (Sennett 1998) overwork (Schor 1991) inequality (Uslaner and Brown 2002) and changing household dynamics and gendered work practices (Bittman and Pixley 1997). These structural forces are powerful, and increasing despite the best efforts of agents. The best resistance to such forces is structural counter-force derived from democratic government; or welfare state protection. Esping Anderson (1990) notes aspects of the welfare state that can alleviate the corrosive forces mentioned above. Welfare states enable 'decommodification', or emancipation from overwork, freeing people from reliance upon the market for total income support. They also redress stratification, through correcting the worst excesses of inequality. And they can alleviate 'defamilialisation' (Esping-Anderson 1999), or reliance of women on traditional paternalistic family forms, through provision of maternity care and payments and part-time employment. However, the success of the welfare state in achieving these aims depends on the values and structure of different welfare state types. Three responses to global community corrosives present themselves.

In the first scenario, as structural forces come to bear, some societies reinforce their adherence to tolerant norms of generalised trust, accepting the risks involved as a matter of faith; trusting more than they should, as described by Mansbridge (1999). They facilitate such an approach, however, with strong (and expensive) institutional backing; in the form of a Universalist welfare state. This scenario captures the Scandinavian high-trust social capital profile (Rothstein, 2003), and is typified by Esping-Anderson's social democratic welfare regime. I call this the *Universal-bridging* response.

In the second scenario, individuals react against increasing global structural pressure by simplifying their lives into the deserving (the employed) and the rest (the marginalised unemployed) who they feel they can't help and who potentially threaten them (eg migrants, marginalised homeless or poor, etc). In effect, bridging capital declines, and bonding capital increases to compensate; the family becomes more important. A strong welfare state is less necessary, and in fact only complicates the boundaries between the poor and the rest. This scenario captures the Anglo-western social capital profile, where trust is declining (Inglehart 1999), and the liberal welfare regime – built on stigma – described by Esping-Anderson. I call this the *simplified-bonding* response.

In the third scenario, divisions are more intense, where cooperation is maintained through strict hierarchal process only, based on status, or else cooperation breaks down across the society at large. Group loyalties are bonding-based, maintained in the face of rivalry with others, on the basis of power and, in extreme cases, violence. This scenario captures the

Italian low social capital profile classically described by Banfield (1958), and more recently by Putnam. It also captures the corporatist welfare regime – built on status distinction – described by Esping-Anderson. I call this the *hierarchical-bonding* response.

Conclusion

I have attempted to show that a prosperous community is a balancing act between structure and agency so as to infer a maximum of recognition within civic society. Several scenarios have been identified whereby rising global structural forces have a significant effect upon social capital, the effects of which are realised or mediated through differing welfare regimes. Volunteering reduced to agency can do little to prevent social decline without compensating structural support, in the form of a rejuvenated state welfare commitment. A ‘thousand points of spite’ may indeed become a reality, unless a Universal-bridging response to global community corrosion can be secured.

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