



Tales of ‘Much of a muchness’: Adventures in the land of social capital

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review of:

Ben Fine (2010) *Theories of social capital: Researchers behaving badly*. London: Pluto. (PB, pp. 288, £27.50, ISBN 0745329977)

Ben Fine’s argument in his second book on social capital, *Theories of social capital*, is straightforward: social capital is a non-sensical concept. With a nod to the Mad Hatter and his tea party in Lewis Carroll’s much-loved *Alice in wonderland*, Fine’s purpose in this book is to point out to us the circularities, tautologies and oxymorons of the exhaustingly vast academic and policy literature on social capital. For Fine, social capital is perhaps like the tales of ‘much of a muchness’ told by the Dormouse at the Mad Hatter’s tea party; that is, not really very much at all, and not something that is easily drawn or made comprehensible. In Fine’s view, the concept of social capital is all things to all people, its deployment is chaotic and its meanings amorphous, such that it is utterly unhelpful in providing any kind of analytical purchase on the socio-economic conditions of our present, that is, contemporary capitalism. The concept is therefore a degradation of, not a contribution to, social science; it excludes or sweeps aside important analytical categories such as social stratification, power, class, race, gender, oppression, violence – or indeed political economy. The whole notion of social capital is oxymoronic, because it seems to presume that there can be a capital that is not social, and what is more that it is a ‘thing’, not a relation. Rather than offering tools for interrogating, critiquing or challenging the status quo of neoliberalism, the wide-spread use of the concept of social capital in public and social policy serves as a panacea for maintaining this status quo and assisting capital in finding ways to measure the utility of social wealth, both for the purposes of producing social cohesion conducive to accumulation and as a force of accumulation in and of itself. In short, the concept of social capital recognises the social as a productive power whilst obfuscating the actual contradictory and conflictual social relations of capital.

This is no light-hearted synopsis of what social capital is, and indeed Fine's book is very much a scathing critique of the term. His earlier work *Social capital versus social theory* (2000) sought to provide an intellectual history of the term from Pierre Bourdieu (1980; 1984; 1987) to Robert Putnam (1994) and Gary Becker (1996), providing a critique of its political economy and its function in policy and in the social sciences. The present book tries to get to grips with the continued explosion of research which deploys the concept in ways that Fine argues are not only vacuous and badly researched, but also reinforce a neoliberal agenda of 'generalised commodity fetishism' (xi), where 'everything from our abilities to our states of mind becomes capital-like' (*ibid.*), to be brought to market and valorised.

So what, if anything, is social capital? In Fine's definition, it is 'any aspect of the social that cannot be deemed to be economic but which can be deemed to be an asset' (3). In the words of social capital advocate Robert Putnam (2001: 167), it encompasses 'features of social organisation, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions'. Social capital is anything, then, that fosters forms of connection and cooperation across society. The personal acquaintances one has that might be helpful in achieving particular aims, family networks of care, one's consent to and trust in the government, civic engagement in the community, friends that strengthen one's emotional well-being, the neighbour who does the shopping for the elderly lady next door, young people volunteering for a charity, even greeting someone in the street – all of these could be considered as a kind of social capital that makes a neighbourhood a friendly and attractive place where people would want to live. Conversely, anything that impacts negatively on this social cohesion – unemployed youth, social unrest, lack of care for the elderly, dirty streets, alienation in the community, forms of violence and abuse – would supposedly signal negative social capital. Likewise, institutions such as the World Bank have been incredibly interested in the generation of social capital as a mode of development. Indeed, the entrepreneurial approach to poverty alleviation in developing countries is one of the lynchpins of contemporary development policy, namely, communities providing for themselves in the wake of neoliberal structural adjustment and lack of public funding, and what is more, harnessing this as a business model. This is why Fine reminds us that this is not about social cohesion per se, it is about social cohesion for the purposes of accumulation.

Fine's acerbic critique begins with a survey of the literature on social capital that, in his view, will just not stop proliferating. *Theories of social capital* is at once a guide on how (not to) carry out social science research and a scathing look at how research on social capital both serves the ideological function of masking the political economy of the present and provides a conduit for the legitimation of the World Bank's structural adjustment agenda. Fine's first port of call in the book is a twist of the theme of 'McDonaldisation'. For him, 'social capital is to social science as McDonald's is to gourmet food' (21). The analogy here is that social capital is not only everywhere, it is also produced under problematic conditions (that is, the commercialised neoliberal university) and is bad for one's health. Yet, in the face of a good deal of criticism, including the prolific work of the

author himself, social capital advocates have responded to their critics. This, according to Fine, has not amounted to much; in fact, it has made matters worse. The criticism that social capital fails to take into account the relational distinctions of gender, race and class has been 'brought back in' (60ff) to the concept. However, this 'bringing back in' (the BBI syndrome) is one that is simply an 'add and stir' remedy, and therefore not much of a remedy at all. At no point is there a real engagement with the ways in which gender, race and class stratify relations of power in society, nor, as Fine argues in a subsequent chapter, can social capital account for any kind of historical contextualisation of its own rise. Before concluding, Fine turns his attention to management and organisation studies. He points out that while the concept first surfaced in the critical wing of this field, here too social capital is deployed in problematic ways, not least as a means for obtaining approval for unpopular socially or environmentally questionable projects for the purposes of augmenting shareholder value.

On the penultimate page of the book, Fine makes a prescient observation, and one that shows how relevant his intervention still is in 2012, two years after the book was first published. His observation is that in the wake of the global financial crisis, there is an indication that the resolution of the crisis will be found in 'more bridging and linking capital between finance and the rest of us, and between governments and finance [...] and otherwise for the rest of us to help one another out as best we can' (206). This is exactly what the UK Government has been proposing as a route out of the crisis, epitomised by David Cameron's notion of the so-called 'Big Society'. It is precisely the social energies of each and every one of us, coupled with further financialisation and further marketisation that will produce the remedy. Fine's work helps us to make the link between the present Tory Party's Compassionate Conservatism of the Big Society and the former New Labour's Third Way post-Washington Consensus. This link allows us to see that what the current coalition government of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties are currently propagating is very much a continuation of what came before, except with less subtlety than a Labour Government that felt much more compelled to justify what it colluded in.

The Big Society is the idea that power is devolved 'from the state to the people', so that communities and civil society organisations become much more involved in the organisation and delivery of public services run by the state. Civil society is thus activated to provide health care, eldercare, run the local libraries and so forth. What lies behind the Big Society is privatisation in the form of social investment, namely an acceleration and intensification of existing forms of Private Financing Initiatives, Public Private Partnerships and so-called 'arms length' companies that we remember well from New Labour days. So on the level of rhetoric, or perhaps ideology, the state continues – with a new twist – to retreat from its involvement in the management, delivery and funding of public services, and relies on civil society organisations and local communities to deliver them instead. Not only are civil society and community organisations supposed to act as service deliverers, but individuals and communities are of course supposed to become more empowered and claim greater autonomy over the management of their everyday lives and the reproduction of their livelihoods without having to depend upon or make demands on

the state. This stems from a conservative ideology that is based not in understandings of autonomy and self-management that we find in left-wing notions of community organising and community involvement, such as mutuals or cooperatives, but is derived from Christian and conservative moral philosophies like communitarianism and virtue ethics. It is the image of the small rural community transposed on to urban social relations, the village where everyone knows each other and helps each other out.

Thus, on the one hand the Government is making drastic cuts in the public sector and instituting austerity measures across the board to deal with the indebtedness of the state. On the other hand, there is an encouragement of a culture of community engagement and social activism whereby the state removes itself in order for people to be more autonomously involved in the production of social life, rendering these areas of so-called 'community empowerment' open to capitalist valorisation through a process of marketisation. It is quite interesting here to remember Thatcher and the beginnings of the neoliberal project. Her famous slogan was '*There is no such thing as society*', and now we have David Cameron ostensibly invoking exactly the opposite – '*society is everything*' – which suggests that we have to harness the social as a way out of the crisis. Yet, looking at all of this more closely, not only is there little difference between New Labour and the ConDem Coalition (except perhaps in degree), the present Tory policies connect directly with the Thatcherism of the 1980s. There are various ideologues behind this who have put out literature in recent years, for example Philipp Blond's *Red Tory* (2010), Jesse Norman's *Big society* (2010), or Matthew Bishop and Michael Green's book on the virtues of philanthrocapitalism, *The road from ruin* (2010). Each of these provide both ideologies and policy road maps for how this 'Big Society' is supposed to work to produce the kind of social capital that is the target of Fine's criticisms.

The affective dimension of Fine's writing undoubtedly conveys to its readers the message of its author. The book tells us so much about social capital, yet as a reader one can't seem to quite grasp exactly what it is. Fine provides us with a litany of lamentations as to the problems with the concept and the demise of social science research today, and his book is bursting with literature surveys and policy critiques. His charge of 'benchkinism' against Robert Putnam in particular and, by association, the pushers of the social capital drug more generally is a striking example. 'Benchkin' is a neologism Fine derives from an amalgamation of the surnames of two economists Levis A. Kochin and Daniel K. Benjamin, who in 1979 developed a theory of unemployment that maintained that high unemployment was the result of workers laziness due to the availability of welfare benefits (cf. Fine, 2000: 82). Their theory was discredited as flawed, while it obviously played into the hands of a neoliberal ideology of welfare state retrenchment that was emerging at the time. This analogy highlights once again the crux of Fine's double argument. The concept of social capital is as much simply bad research with spurious theory, spurious methods, spurious measures, spurious evidence and false conclusions, as it has grave ideological consequences in reproducing and legitimising neoliberal policy. Villified too is what Ben Fine calls today's 'hack academia' (as in low-quality and hastily assembled, not as in breaking and entering in order to transform or reappropriate). This 'hack academia' and its

concomitant commercialisation that fosters a 'MacDonaldisation' of social theory, with its formulaic approaches to the study of social phenomena – "social capital plus X" (32) – serves to reinforce technocratic approaches to social science research.

While Fine offers us an acerbic critique of the de-politicising nature of social capital, the reader is left with a question as to how to make sense of the social processes that the concept is an expression of. Here, I would argue, it would help us to turn to the other side of the social relation of capital, and one that seems to simmer beneath Fine's critique, namely labour. One of the pernicious aspects of the literatures on social, human and other capitals that have burgeoned in recent years is precisely the eradication and invisibilisation of labour. Indeed, as Jason Read (2009), Etienne Balibar (1994) and others have pointed out, today's neoliberal subjects have, or are supposed to have, internalised the perspective of capital. Digging up the perspective of labour and making it visible in the analysis of social capital, I would argue, actually helps us to move forward. Such a perspective is a wedge that enables us to prise open the technocracies that Fine laments. Firstly, taking a labour perspective allows for an understanding of the ways in which people's free labour is harnessed where the state divests from the reproduction of labour through the imposition of cuts and austerity. This is something that feminist literatures aware of the persistent invisibilisation of reproductive labour are particularly attuned to.¹³ Secondly, a labour perspective allows for an understanding of how the social activities of living labour are rendered productive for capital through the imposition of the market and through social investment, which shapes these social activities in ways that make them conducive to accumulation. The political wedge of a perspective from the view of labour and of social reproduction is made apparent in Massimo De Angelis' (2003: 9-10) counterposition of social solidarity against social capital:

Civil society organisations have sprung into public domains to fulfil human needs. In the eyes of neoliberals, such an emergent activity of society's self-defence against market colonisation is seen as an opportunity to build 'social capital', i.e. to promote a form of social cohesion that is compatible with capital accumulation. But in the eyes of the millions of grassroots organisations, the opposite is true: their activities are a form of social solidarity that sets a limit to capital accumulation and the colonisation of life by capitalist markets.

This account of a disjuncture between the expansion of capital and its resistance across the terrain of civil society in processes of governance highlights the important fault-line of the current crisis and one that is epitomised by the so-called Big Society even as it seems to falter. Yet here, a further problem surfaces, and is one that Ben Fine also draws attention to. If the social capital literature is underpinned by a pernicious methodological individualism, as Fine argues, so too are the 'communities' that are invoked across the board from the left to the right. Politicising social capital, then, does not only mean pulling an (often supposed) community from the claws of capitalist valorisation, it also means struggling against the

13 See for example the recent special issue of *The Commoner Journal* on 'Care Work, Domestic Labour and Social Reproduction' edited by Camille Barbagallo and Silvia Federici (Winter 2012), available at http://www.commoner.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/commoner_issue-15.pdf.

kind of neoliberal subjectivity that striates our very being in the world – on the one hand subsuming us completely into the production machine and relying on our cooperative and communicative connections to do so, while on the other pitting us against one another, turning us into competitive utility-maximising beings caught up in the affective anxieties of a rat race that is only being intensified by austerity. Thus, I would venture that the contestation of social capital may lie, not in the vituperation of badly behaved researchers and the revocation of the concept, but in its politicisation as a site of struggle. Rendering visible the perspectives of labour, and thus the current widespread crisis of social reproduction, makes it possible to drive a stake right into the heart of the kinds of reifications that Fine is rightly concerned about.

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