Progress in Development Studies 8, 3 (2008) pp. 261–69

Commentary

Social capital in wonderland: the World Bank behind the looking glass

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Abstract: Whilst, from their internally privileged position, the World Bank's social capitalists have defended their use and heavy promotion of social capital within the Bank as a strategy for civilizing the Bank's economists, this is shown to have been both a flawed strategy and one that misreads both the internal dynamic of the Bank and its external influence.

Keywords*:* Social capital; World Bank; knowledge bank

I Introduction

Once upon a time, long ago, I worked in the British coal industry when there still was one to speak of. It used to be said of armchair academics that you could not understand the industry and its history until you had been down a pit and experienced underground conditions firsthand, as well as the corresponding solidarity across the workforce.[1] Being of a perverse intellectual inclination, I posited that, on the contrary, you could not possibly understand the industry once you had been down a pit for loss of objectivity.

Now, of course, in the wake of post-modernism, I would contend that both propositions are equally valid, given some degree of relativity of knowledge. But neither one, the other, nor both together get us very far in and of themselves in understanding an industry that employed over one million workers in the UK in 1913 and just a few thousand today. By the same token, whether you have worked for the World Bank (WB) or not, will be of limited relevance in and of itself in grasping the enormity of the nature and causes of poverty. And the same applies, on a lesser scale, to the nature and the causes of 'social capital'.

Whilst I have been down a pit, I have never worked for the WB, a case of sample selection bias on both sides. So I have to take seriously the point of view of those who have. But I do not have to privilege their knowledge and understanding. Those who work within the Bank are not necessarily the best commentators on their own context and impact, and may be blinded or deceived by their position as well as

 10.1177/146499340800800304

by the absence of a broader and external perspective. Relativity of knowledge is as much a matter of contest as of position. Accordingly, especially when it comes to social capital, it is important that insiders and outsiders relative to the WB engage in a debate fully and openly although it might be reasonable, at least in principle, to be economical with the truth if thereby gaining warranted advantage – keeping a pit open and saving colliery jobs or changing the WB to the benefit of the world's poor. But such causal links between distortion of the truth or loss of intellectual integrity and the promotion of the greater purpose would need to be established and not simply wished into place.[2] WB social capitalists now accept that much of the analytical criticism that was levelled against them was, indeed, correct and known by them to be so at the time. Yet, even if their stated reason for dissembling on this is accepted as honestly given (to reform the Bank's economists), this does not entail acceptance of their own account of their own role and its implications. The evidence is at least as consistent with the hypothesis of their own self-promotion within the Bank and of conformity with, rather than shifting of, the Bank's trajectory to the extent that this has, indeed, occurred.

In this light, I begin in Section II by pointing to the absence of debate over the WB's social capital as a result of the purportedly honourable motives on the part of its social capitalists, inducing a strategy derived and deployed from their position of inner privilege. They could not both engage in a debate honestly and promote social capital within (and outside) the Bank, so they chose to promote rather than to debate. This is hardly surprising as they now confess not to disagree with their opponents on intellectual substance as opposed to strategy to reform the Bank from within. Whether those motives and actions were justified is assessed in Section III and found to be wanting. The closing section assesses the collateral damage outside the Bank as a result of the promotion of social capital from within.

II The concept and debate that never was?

In a most recent and unusually reflective special issue on social capital, Knorringa and van Staveren (2007: 6) seem to observe, approvingly of their collection as editors, that 'none of the contributions spend a lot of "ink" on defining social capital'. It is apparent that social capital has been used so widely, in so many different ways that it is no longer capable of definition other than as an analytical or empirical special case of what is otherwise a collective chaos. Social capital has come to stand for any form of social interaction and as these are so diverse, it becomes ridiculous to pretend that they have something in common. Thus, whilst social interactions or relations do exist, social capital does not exist other than as a created fiction of the imagination?[3] Not surprisingly, then, when social capital is promoted, it inevitably involves, conscious or otherwise, a fetishism of representing it as something other, usually more, than it is. This is not to say there is no material basis for social capital, any more than to deny one for religion or ideology more generally. The issue is whether subservience to such fetishism in principle and in the form it takes in practice is positive or negative, on balance, in its implications.

I take the negative view of social capital as it has turned out. When my campaign against social capital in general and that emanating from the World Bank in particular began, I received advice from a sympathetic mole within the WB that the response I would receive on an individual basis would be: a request to back off in deference to allowing beneficial change to occur; that no criticism would ever be answered; and I would be offered a job.[4] Unlike others whose more critical stances on social capital were mooted (muted) once they aligned themselves with the WB's funding, I have not been offered employment. But, otherwise, the mole's advice has been entirely borne out, not least as strikingly symbolized by Bebbington (2004). Until this contribution and its companion piece (Bebbington *et al.*, 2004),[5] the World Bank capitalists had simply failed to respond to criticism at all. By contrast, publications in 2004 offered a watershed in which scarcely a page could go by without my being referenced, 13 times in seven pages in Bebbington (2004)![6]

Did this mean that, at last, a proper debate would ensue – unfortunately not. Bebbington (2004), himself, in his first two pages explains the poor results of a debate that had not in fact taken place in terms of its tone, anger, acrimony, fiddling whilst Rome burns, general antipathy to the WB, preaching to the converted, undue passion and indignation, and lack of modesty, reflexivity, self-criticism and creativity. Later he offers lofty advice on problem framing, interdisciplinarity and middle-range theory. But, much more important than all of this non-engagement with the substance of social capital is that its critics have simply been breathtakingly undermined by total acceptance by the WB social capitalists of more or less all of the criticisms of them.[7] So nothing to debate since the following criticisms, in summary form, now seem to be both recognized and accepted 99 percent by the WB social capitalists:

> Social capital is totally chaotic in definition, method and theory; it is indiscriminately deployed across applications and can be more or less anything in principle if not in practice; it is parasitic on and crudely simplifying of other social theory; it misunderstands both social and capital; it is complicit with mainstream economics, 'economics imperialism' and rational choice theory; it neglects the economic, power, conflict, the state, gender, race, class, ethnicity, global, context, etc; it is self-help raised from individual to community level; Bourdieu has been discarded but is being brought back in piecemeal alongside other omitted factors; it induces hack academia (hackademia) in publication, research and funding; it fails to address criticism other than incorporating as another factor; it is Third Wayism as weak response to neo-liberalism; it has been heavily promoted by the World Bank as a rhetorical device associated with shift from Washington to post Washington Consensus; and it is a peculiar end of millennium product of the dual retreat from the extremes of postmodernism and neo-liberalism.

In short, I have spent the past 10 years or so offering these criticisms by word of mouth, even exaggerating so as to solicit response and get a debate. Now, we know why there was no debate other than, usually in private, to apologize for being guilty to a lesser degree, to all the charges but to be excused on grounds of pursuit of other worthy ulterior motives. This claim to virtue is, however, to overlook the broader picture of legitimizing an inadequate concept by participating with it. As a critic of social capital, I have been accused of many things and motives, not least by Bebbington, from anger to Marxism, but a casual reading of my book, Fine (2001), indicates that its primary concern is with the degradation of scholarship that has been attached to social capital. Failure to debate with critics and then agreeing with them is but a sideshow in all of this, and Bebbington points to a worthy motive of his own for promoting social capital and on a grander scale. It is nothing less than to serve as 'a language mobilized for struggles within the Bank'. Indeed, 'the social capital discussion … was a real battlefield of knowledge inside the Bank' (p. 346). With this, and on the wider terrain of 'social and cultural dimensions of development … it may be nearing the end of its useful life' (p. 348). The social capital that never was? So a debate on social capital can now at most be an obituary and the slate wiped clean as we build bridging social capital around future intellectual endeavours (p. 349).

Yet, the purported short life of social capital as practised by its WB proponents cannot be so readily exonerated, quite apart from the monster that it has in part spawned in the real battlefield of knowledge *outside* the Bank. Bebbington (2004) offers little other than assertion on these inner struggles but Bebbington *et al.* (2004), offer a fuller account, equally remarkable for accepting criticisms of social capital and again referencing me fulsomely where previously there was total lack of engagement. Still, at the time of its writing, Bebbington *et al*. (2004) was unique in some respects for revealing inner workings and dissent within the World Bank, and I recommend it for all to read for this and also, if harshly, as an exercise in virtuous self-delusion. For a start, Bebbington *et al*. (2004) run the paradox of beginning with a *general* appeal to *critical* discourse theory, but concluding *in particular* in favour of establishment, WB, postures as an example of it in practice! Critical discourse means uncritical discourse.

One way of doing so is by appealing to case studies purporting to support the positive role played by the WB and social capital. This is echoed in Bebbington (2004) and Bebbington *et al*. (2006). Leaving aside the issue of how this represents a victory in the internal battle for knowledge, these studies are notable for lack of independent evaluation, and for one case, one of Bebbington *et al*. (2004) was not only the authority cited for favourable outcome but was also the project manager! Is it possible that far from social capital promoting the projects, the latter are being used to promote the discourse of social capital in a token exercise or three, and as part of a broader rhetorical strategy of legitimizing the Bank? There is already a tradition of social capital being imposed ex post on research already undertaken, starting with Putnam himself (Fine, 2001).[8] Why not construct projects anew to demonstrate its powers? Yet, notably absent from Bebbington *et al*., is any acknowledgement of examples of the negative impact of social capital in Bank projects, as highlighted by Fine (2001), for example, for coal-mining in India and the ludicrous application of social capital to Russia's health and welfare crisis to explain differential patterns as opposed to disastrous outcomes in absolute terms.

In short, a more rounded, independent assessment of case studies is needed to make an overall judgement, something Bebbington only looks for in the future. The wider (critical) social capital literature is already questioning not only whether there is much by way of policy conclusions that can be drawn from social capital (beyond if it is there, it may help depending on context and what has been left out of consideration) but also whether it serves more as an instrument of central authority parading as decentralized participation. Even more important is the bigger omitted picture of a huge and continuing shift within the Bank from public to private sector support in infrastructure and other lending. Even if social capital is on balance favourable to a given project or two, this effect is dominated by overall portfolio effects that will subordinate the social to the private (and profitable), despite or even though the current Bank rethinks on privatization, for example (Bayliss and Fine, 2007). Social capitalists have neither addressed this nor the potential of continuing privatization to destroy the social capital that they seek to build up in the odd projects here and there (Champlin, 1999). Also, they have not paid any attention to the patterns of lending and conditionalities that have accompanied loans in the shift to Poverty Reductions Strategy Papers (PRSPs). Rhetoric to the contrary, these have tightened on the practices of the Washington Consensus (van Waeyenberge, 2007) for an outstanding and detailed account of tightening aid allocation in practice. Whilst, rightly or wrongly, Bebbington (2004: 348) is dismissive of the virtues of grand narratives and regrets that social capital has become one, there is a yawning gap between an isolated case study or those demonstrating the virtues of social capital and the generalities of grand narrative. And it is a gap that, as far as the WB is concerned, is heavily filled out by (private and privatized) business as usual, irrespective of or even masked by, the rhetoric of social capital.

III Strategic weaknesses are tactical strengths?

These are my own assertions on the relationship between the scholarship, rhetoric and policy practice of the WB. There is no space to justify them here. But the point is that they are not even considered in the Panglossian view of the forward march of social capital within the Bank. Instead, absolute reliance is placed upon the idea that discourse has an effect within the Bank, but some things cannot be changed so easily, or at all, and so intellectual compromises must be made. Unbeknownst to outsiders, compromises are accepted strategically only to be won back surreptitiously through the Trojan horse of social capital. As already indicated, the now confessed list of conceptual concessions involved is astonishing from economic alternatives through structures of class, ethnicity, gender, power, political economy, sensitivity to time and place and so on.[9] This is in order to be able to engage with Bank economists who, by the own account of Bebbington *et al.*, would appear to have accepted the stalking horse with little or no cost, not least with Olson prevailing over Fox,[10] the quantitative over the qualitative[11] and Collier over social capital.[12]

As an internal strategy, there seems to have been no way for social capitalists within the Bank to recognize failure, nor opportunism on part of opponents (and selves), let alone pushing their strategy to the point of, or beyond, being disciplined themselves by the Bank. Was there a chance of World Bank social capitalists protesting, even resigning, en masse in solidarity with Stiglitz, Kanbur and others? It seems not. There were those who did challenge the Bank from within at the highest level and on the grounds of economics and policy. Did their fate possibly serve as a warning on ambition to social capitalists, and a protective cover for them, rather than being seized as the opportunity for alliances to be forged? Instead of fiddling at the margins in order that the 'social' and their understanding of it be taken seriously by the Bank's economists, would it not have been better to have themselves taken the economy and the Chief Economist seriously? It hardly warrants the notion of the Bank as a 'battlefield of knowledge' and social capital victories might better be interpreted as, at most, Pyrrhic in a minor skirmish, especially taking a longer view of the Bank's economics from before the Washington Consensus. This is the light in which to set Bebbington's (2004: 347) parody of opponents as not offering alternatives but simply making calls to bring in Marxian political economy and class.[13] I would have remained critical but more respectful if the social capitalists had at least promoted the economics that was and remains, rhetorically, hegemonic at the time of their strategizing and which provided them with the space to prosper – the post-Washington Consensus.

For one thing I did get wrong, at least initially (Fine, 1999), was to exaggerate the likely impact of social capital within the Bank. I saw it as the WB's way of outflanking notions of the developmental state as an alternative to the Comprehensive Development Framework and Post Washington Consensus (CDF/PWC) in the enforced legitimizing retreat from the Washington Consensus. That, in the event, it was not necessary for social capital to play a major role in this respect, reflects the unexpected extent of compromise (abject surrender) made by the social capitalists on the economy! Thus, I was *more* optimistic than Bebbington *et al.* (2004) on what could be achieved by inner conflict. Social capital did not even serve in place of the despised developmental state approach, so low has its profile been within the economics of the Bank.

By perverse way of compensation, they are, however, more upbeat on what has been achieved and claim it is the consequence of their strategy of promoting social capital within the WB, and for which they are privileged as inner participants, both to assess success and to dismiss critics unaware of their wider and inner purpose. But, even on this, their potentially strongest ground, they are at their weakest. First, social critics are homogenized and misrepresented, not least as relying upon deterministic analysis by inclination or for want of access to inner Bank discourse. I, for example, am perceived to 'reify' social capital. But even a casual reading of my book reveals not only a refusal to be deterministic but also to offer a more than full anticipation of the points made by Bebbington *et al.* (2004) despite their inner privilege. These are:

- Careful distinction between the rhetoric, scholarship and policy of the Bank. These are neither rigidly mutually determining nor are they always consistent with one another, although they do each have an influence on one another and on the broader environment. They do shift, individually and in relation to one another and in response to external factors and inner struggles, and the relations between them are not only different over time but also different over topic. This is all illustrated by reference not only to social capital but also, by way of contrast, to trade, privatization and education.
- Non-economists within the Bank have traditionally not been taken seriously despite their efforts to the contrary. This is closely documented through reference to the work of Cernea.
- The strategy of being taken seriously focused on social capital and had some success in light of shift to Comprehensive Development Framework and post-Washington Consensus.
- This all entailed a compromise with economists within the Bank, reinforcing the degradation of scholarship associated with the broader rise of social capital in the 1990s.

Second, if Bebbington *et al.* (2004) enjoyed superior knowledge of the practices of World Bank economists and how to overcome them, they offer little account of this and why social capital should succeed. Surely, if putting as much effort into strategy as into social capital itself, they would have addressed the six points that Broad (2006) has now revealed from her own study of the practices of Bank economists, tying them to Bank requirements. These are through hiring (orthodox, Anglo-Saxon trained economists with golden pay levels to discourage dissent); promotion that provides incentives for 'paradigm maintenance', especially in the enforced input from research to operations;[14] harder review of publications that offer dissent; internal marginalization of individuals who do dissent; manipulation of data to the point of falsehood; and, external projection of those who do conform to paradigm maintenance. Our social capitalists offer no evidence on how they were planning to overcome these practices, that they have succeeded, nor even that they were aware of them.

It is, then, more plaintive than ironic cry that, a decade after social capital was brought to the Bank in pursuit of civilizing its economists, one of its leading proponents should feel compelled to complain that 'development is about a lot more than economics, and that, accordingly, economics should not have (as it currently does at the Bank) a near-monopoly on determining the content and validity of development research' (Rao and Woolcock, 2007). This is in response to the Deaton Report, 'An Evaluation of World Bank Research, 1998–2005'. They also complain that given about one in 20 of designated research staff are non-economists, 'perhaps one of the twenty [research] evaluators [used by the Report] could have been a sociologist or anthropologist?'. At the least, this would appear to be a confession of abject failure on the part of the social capitalists in getting themselves taken seriously. At the most, it displays an institutional disregard for them and having served their purpose, they are being dumped rather than they, themselves, dumping social capital.

IV GBS, Hegel and Abraham Lincoln

In lieu of conclusion, let me first paraphrase George Bernard Shaw by suggesting social capitalism is not bad because social capitalists are bad but because they are good. By their own account, Bebbington *et al.* (2004) have honourable motives but they are perverted by the circumstances in which they situate themselves. These are talented scholars, confessing to mislead their colleagues and the rest of the world for strategic reasons. Is this an apposite model for the putative knowledge bank, let alone for those aspiring developmentalists who can be prised away from the careerism offered by the Bank? And the opportunities that arise for reform within the Bank owe a great deal to the pressures that are generated from *outside*, by the very scholars and activists whom Bebbington *et al*. (2004) would dismiss as having overlooked the significance of the strategy that they have adopted!

Second, to paraphrase Hegel, in this age of reason, it is possible to find a rationale for anything. By their partial appeal to the bigger picture, a chain of reasoning leads from the promotion of social capitalist(s) in the Bank to poverty alleviation, empowerment and the like, in a project or two, with the prospect of further gains across all of those no-go areas within the Bank on which there remains limited bend, not least the economy and the economic despite these being the intellectually weakest (and most important) points of the Bank's posturing. Further, Bebbington *et al*. (2004) and other social capitalists show limited knowledge of the economics of their Bank opponents and of the political economy they claim they would foist upon them as alternative for which social capital is their putative thin end of the wedge.[15]

Third, to paraphrase Abraham Lincoln, you can fool some of the people all of the time… but not Bank economists any of the time for they are too foolish to be fooled. They do not understand and are hostile to the issues that the social capitalists are seeking to incorporate. Yet, far from learning this lesson, Bebbington *et al*. (2004) close by offering the frightening prospect of fooling the fools once more by discarding social capital and moving to the more satisfactory notions of, 'empowerment and community driven development. This is already happening'. As (Bank) economists are now wont to advise us; this raises huge problems of 'credibility' in light of past experience should they really have been fooled once already by their own social capitalists.[16] It also begs the question of what sort of empowerment and community development it is that depends upon the inner shenanigans revealed by our heroic social capitalists whose results are then foisted upon Bank projects.

Bebbington *et al*. (2004) seem to have fooled themselves into believing that their own, heavily compromised struggles within the Bank unfold to the benefit of the deserving poor on the outside, without regard to broader intellectual and ideological impact. Such compromises, not battles, are necessarily carried over into external relations and effects.[17] At the practical level, soliciting funding from Scandinavians for social capital necessarily buys them into the Bank's take upon it. But these countries' own development agencies have been far more progressive than the Bank. The result is to promote the Bank's own omissions in contexts where alternatives could have prospered (and been turned against the Bank's economists). And this is only a small part of the picture of the entire social capital enterprise, whether attached to development or otherwise.

Thus, the institutional logic of promoting social capital within the Bank necessarily conformed with its promotion outside, reflecting and consolidating the rise of social capital in contexts where there was neither wish nor need to omit everything from economic alternatives through to gender, power and political economy. This is implicitly accepted by Bebbington *et al*. (2004) in that the criticisms of social capital are now only being acknowledged as essentially correct, 10 years after they had adopted the term. Now that is why I perceive them as social capitalists and unfortunately, soft and functional in all respects as part of the Bank's own 'social capital', neither offering nor achieving anything by way of a challenge to the Bank in its economics whether as rhetoric (advocacy), scholarship or policy. Indeed, I could forgive the WB's social capitalists everything – their failure to have debated, their deception over their true views, their pompous declarations of virtue in relation to grounded methods, interdisciplinarity, strategic engagement with opponents, reform within constraints and so on – if only they had once genuinely challenged the Bank's economics and economists. The failure to do so is what is most visible from outside and by their own account, from within. If, within the WB, social capital represented a 'political economy of language in that institution, for those who work inside the Bank' and 'in large measure this was a language mobilized for struggles with the Bank' (Bebbington, 2004: 346); it has first and foremost been a language without vocabulary (or practice) for political economy, for struggle or for mobilization.

Notes

1. In this context, Bloor (2002: 92) explicitly rejects (class-bridging) social capital:

   > Resemblance to theorists' social capital and policy-makers' empowering partnerships is only a superficial one, that the improvements in pit safety stemmed from a collective impulse that owed more to class consciousness than to civic engagement, and that miners sought to improve safety in self-conscious opposition to owners and managers rather than in partnership.

   Of course, the problem was one of too much bonding social capital within the two sides of the industry and not enough bridging social capital between them. Not to worry, all solved, however temporarily, by the linking capital furnished by nationalization.
2. See Fine (1990) for the farcical procedure involved in colliery closure reviews following the miners' strike of 1985/1986.
3. Apart from a plethora of other capitals, there is now a plethora of social capitals – bonding, bridging, linking, bracing (new on the block), cognitive, structural and relational, and most apposite, imagined (Quinn 2005) the social capital you have with soap operas, for example and one suspects increasingly, reality television.
4. See Fine (2007) for more detail on all this and http://www.soas.ac.uk/departments/departmentinfo.cfm?navid=490 for reference to other contributions on social capital in the context of 'economics imperialism'.
5. Note that this is also complemented by Bebbington *et al*. (2006) which, despite being later, is much less engaged with critics. There is every reason to believe that this is because of forced scholarly standards on the earlier refereed journal article.
6. And in Bebbington *et al*. (2004), I am cited 10 times in an article that contains a 100 other references. Yet, the social capital website and the Bank's overall website, more generally, have effectively persisted in failing to acknowledge *any* of my work at all.
7. This assessment is confirmed by Knorringa and van Staveren (2007: 2) suggesting Bebbington and World Bank collaborators:

   > by and large seem to agree with the critiques of methodological individualism, instrumentalism, and lack of attention to power and social structures … [and] attribute these shortcomings to the ideological framework to which they are bound, that of the Washington Consensus driven by the World Bank, favouring markets over states, individuals over groups, and ignoring issues of power.
8. Bebbington (2000) himself seems to be able to do well enough without social capital! Bebbington (2002) reveals its appeal for him at its height before the current decline.
9. Also an omission, omitted by Bebbington *et al*. (2004), is globalization, itself a general absence from social capital analysis, and significant for the extent, unlike social capital, to which it has been won away from orthodoxy and with an economic content (Fine, 2004).
10. Methodological individualism over political economy.
11. The problem is not quantitative versus qualitative analysis but how to combine the two satisfactorily – this in general being precluded by Bank economists on the basis of their own often appalling quantitative analysis. See Deaton *et al*. (2006) for a friendly slaughter on this score of Bank 'advocacy'.
12. I am an economist, I can analyze anything. See Ferguson (2000: 995) for a humorous take on economics and language, an important but flawed input to the economic (Collier's) analysis of civil war, for example.
13. One of the remarkable myths propagated by social capitalists is that they are innovative in understanding civil society and on bringing it back into consideration

whereas they are selectively parasitical and distorting on what has long been there. The mirror image of this myth is that economists resist consideration of the social whereas they are currently embracing it on their own terms for which social capital has proven an ideal conduit, handed to them on a plate by the missionary social capitalists from other disciplines.

14. One element in this is external journal publication where paradigm-conforming. Am I right in thinking on casual observation that this is growing, possibly motivated by a wish for fluidity of position between the Bank and academic employment?
15. The critique of social capital from within mainstream economics is possibly the least acknowledged part of my work (Fine, 2001: Chapter 10).
16. Significantly, Lincoln's quote is deployed in an explanation of rational expectations, the neo-liberal economist's version of not fooling any of the people any of the time, http:/www.econlib.org/library/enc/RationalExpectations.html.
17. And the WB's social capital website is both a disgrace and a barrier to the pursuit of knowledge, given its chaotic inclusion of anything and anyone as illustrative of usually unwitting use of social capital (Fine 2001: 125).

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