

Foreword

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Thoughtful observers at least since Alexis de Tocqueville have recognized that America's distinctive strength lies in the vitality of our civil society. While de Tocqueville opined that Americans are "forever forming associations," history has belied his conclusion. It is disconcertingly clear that over the last generation Americans have dramatically deserted the voting booth, the family dining table, the church pew, the union hall, the PTA assembly, and even the bowling league and coffee klatch.

These trends of civic disengagement affect our social well-being beyond some warm and cuddly "loss of community." Much hard evidence has accumulated that civic engagement and social connectedness are practical preconditions for better schools, safer streets, faster economic growth, more effective government, and even healthier and longer lives. The theory of social capital provides one useful way of summarizing these patterns. By analogy to physical capital and human capital, *social capital* refers to the norms and networks of civil society that lubricate cooperative action among both citizens and their institutions. Without adequate supplies of social capital—that is, without civic engagement, healthy community institutions, norms of mutual reciprocity, and trust—social institutions falter.

As alarming as it is to see our stock of social capital plunging, it is gratifying to witness a resurgence of interest in the concept. One of my colleagues traced the term back at least as far as a 1919 article by L. F. Hanifan, a West Virginia school reformer. Social capital has since been rediscovered by Jane Jacobs in her 1960s work on urban design and again by James Coleman in his examination of Chicago schools in the 1970s. My 1995 article "Bowling Alone" picked up these themes and has led to scores of active research projects around the world on social capital. The theme has been the subject of presidential or prime ministerial addresses from Finland to New Zealand and of dozens of recent scholarly conferences.

There are four challenges ahead for social capital theorists. This issue of *Housing Policy Debate* on the connection between social capital and housing policy is very helpful in addressing the first task: demonstrating the utility of social capital in new domains.

The last five years have been extremely fertile academic ground for understanding how an expanded stock of social capital could help our country address some questions that vex us. The high-quality articles in this journal help strengthen the nexus between social capital and the urban and economic redevelopment we seek.

Three other challenges remain. First, we need to better understand *how* social capital works. Although we have witnessed powerful correlations between social capital and issues we care deeply about (like street safety, job creation, neighborhood redevelopment, etc.), we know precious little about how social capital works at a micro-level: What is it about networks of trust and reciprocity that enhance school achievement, make neighborhood redevelopment stick, or make citizens more resistant to illness?

Second, we need to deepen our understanding of the different forms of social capital and the culture in which they are found. The many forms of social capital can be viewed along at least six dimensions: (1) *formality*—there are both formal and informal types of civic engagement; (2) *purpose*—some institutions are public-regarding, some are private-regarding; (3) *bridging*—bonds of trust and reciprocity can bridge cleavages in society or, conversely, bring like-minded or like-ethnic individuals together; (4) *immediacy*—trust may stem from immediate, face-to-face connections or generalized, anonymous bonds; (5) *strandedness/intensity*—at one end of this spectrum are durable, intense, and multistranded networks (i.e., people know each other through multiple, overlapping networks), at the other are the weaker, more fleeting bonds that might be created from a day of volunteering together; and (6) *social location*—neighborhood ties represent the place-based end of the social capital spectrum, while Internet groups represent the function-based end.

In this context, my colleague at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Xavier de Souza Briggs, has written that some types of social capital in inner-city neighborhoods enable residents to “get by,” whereas other types of social capital (generally *bridging* social capital, by which residents establish connections outside the poor neighborhood) enable residents to “get ahead” by “importing clout.” His explanation has a lot of intuitive appeal and, increasingly, data to back it up. We need more efforts of this type to distinguish forms of social capital and demonstrate how those forms affect the benefit. In addition, we know simply too little about how social capital works across different cultural settings. This is especially important internationally but increasingly important in an ever more diverse United States. I don’t expect that such work will disprove the importance of social capital. Rather, it will help us understand, for example, how church networks and the benefits inherent in these networks vary depending on whether one is looking at a church in the

inner city or one in the suburb; a synagogue or a Baptist church; or church networks among Hispanics or Asians. Probably the groundwork for this is a sort of social capital “botany field work” that will help us develop a *Peterson’s Field Guide* to the forms of social capital across different cultural communities and countries. For the moment, our understanding of social capital is crude—akin to a guide that lists only four classes: mammal, insect, reptile, and bird.

Third, and finally, we need to understand how social capital is created. In general, the social capital-rich get richer and the poor poorer because social capital runs in virtuous circles and vicious spirals. My work over the last several years has shown that *all* U.S. states in one generation have shown dramatic declines in their levels of social capital, despite widely varying social capital starting points. We need to learn how communities break out of these vicious spirals. For example, how did Tupelo, MS, succeed in building a strong base of social capital over the last generation despite starting with a weak social capital foundation? In one particularly ambitious effort to study how social capital is created, a group of practitioners and colleagues have launched the Saguaro Seminar: Civic Engagement in America at the John F. Kennedy School at Harvard University. This seminar brings together some leading thinkers and doers from different geographic, demographic, professional, and political backgrounds for a multiyear dialogue to develop broad-based, actionable strategies that may succeed in rebuilding our nation’s stock of social capital.

One of the enduring qualities of American democracy and civil society is its capacity for self-renewal. A century ago, America’s stock of social capital was at ebb tide, reduced by three decades of urbanization, industrialization, and immigration that uprooted Americans and immigrants from their friends, social institutions, and family. But, remarkably, faced with this challenge, America righted herself through several decades of fervent social invention of the civic institutions needed to reconnect Americans to their new communities. Indeed, many civic pillars that endure to this day were founded within a window of only a few decades, during the “Progressive Era.” These include the League of Women Voters, the National Urban League, the Parent-Teacher Association, settlement houses, the NAACP, the American Red Cross, the Boy Scouts, the Boys and Girls Clubs, Hadassah, the Knights of Columbus, Rotary, the YWCA, and many others.

We can learn from the experiences of that era, when people faced many problems similar to those we have today: income inequality, political corruption, degradation of cities, fear of immigration, and racial tensions. One of the hallmarks of civic revitalization during

the Progressive Era was a partnership between academics and practitioners on the most pressing social issues of their time.

We can make new progress in the current era, but it won't happen without the concerted creativity and energy of Americans nationwide and without a firm understanding of the importance of the social capital that helps mobilize philanthropists, governments, and local community leaders. And thus, I commend the Fannie Mae Foundation's work in expanding the outer edges of our social capital knowledge and connecting academics and practitioners concerned with revitalizing social capital through housing policy and community development.

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