

Social Capital, its Uses and Contradictions, and its Relevance to the West African Ebola
Crisis of 2013 – 2015.

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Social capital has been proposed as a useful concept for the understanding of epidemics of Emerging Infectious Diseases, such as the epidemic of Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) which occurred in West Africa in 2013 – 2015. This paper reviews some of the literature around the social capital concept, highlights the contested nature of that concept, and considers how the concept might be best applied to the study of the recent EVD crisis. It is argued that the emphasis in such studies must always be on the local meanings and concepts which establish the forms of social connection and networks which define social capital.

At the end of 2013, the first case in what would become the Ebola epidemic of 2013 – 2015 was identified, in the Guinean border town of Guéckédou (Kennedy and Nisbet 2015: 2). This was followed by a failure of both local governments and the ‘international community’ to intervene at an adequately early point against the burgeoning epidemic. Their failure allowed this outbreak of Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) to become the worst in recorded history, with a death toll numbering in several thousands in the affected countries, Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. Although the epidemic finally receded in mid-2015, its unprecedented scale, and its wider social cost, will require a great deal of research if it is to be fully understood. An emergent consensus has linked the scale of the outbreak to serious defects and deficiencies in the physical infrastructure, economies, health care and systems and political orders in the affected countries, defects and deficiencies that are rooted in the recent experience of protracted civil war (Sierra Leone, Liberia), or prolonged single-party rule and

political crisis (Guinea). The consistent theme throughout the crisis was that of the inability of local authorities to properly effect and implement the public health measures, such as quarantines, that are necessary to the check and rollback epidemics. This inability was the result not only of deficiencies in the health care infrastructure (lack of doctors and other medical personnel, a paucity of ambulances, insufficient hospital places, etc.) but also due to widespread mistrust of government and the state among those communities most at risk of EVD. The issue of trust is significant here, because trust is at the heart of one of the key concepts of the past two decades – social capital. Defined as the amount of network connections which individuals and groups can draw on to gain access to resources, social capital has been seen as directly related to other social indicators relevant to health (Lomas 1998). Where high levels of connectedness and trust exist within a society – that is, where that society enjoys high levels of social capital – are directly related to low incidences of health problems and disease. Where levels of social capital are low or non-existent, on the other hand, health problems can be expected to be severe, and risk of susceptibility to epidemic diseases at both the individual and societal level can be expected to be high. Given the unprecedented scale of the EVD crisis in West Africa, and given that the disease spreads through social interaction in the kinds of social networks that are seen as one of the key defining features of social capital, and given also that social capital has become a key concept in public health and the understanding of epidemics, it seems reasonable to assume that many, if not most of the efforts to understand the West African Ebola crisis will make use of the social capital concept in some way.

The purpose of this paper¹ is threefold. It is to review some of the literature on social capital, to highlight the contested and contestable nature of the concept, and to begin the task of thinking through how the social capital concept might be applicable or relevant to the case

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of the West African EVD crisis of 2013 - 2015. This is something that has direct relevance for policy questions, including those policy questions that arise in the wake of mass disasters such as that which struck the upper Guinea coast of West Africa in the last eighteen months. While it does seem to be the case that higher levels of social capital correlate with better public health, it also appears to be the case that not all forms of social capital are the same, and that the cultural systems which provide the means with which to forge social connections and accumulate social capital within any given population will vary from population to population, with consequences for the forms of social capital that appear in any given population. Different forms of social capital maybe correlated with different outcomes in, for example, degrees of susceptibility to viral epidemics. This is the second part of this paper's purpose.

What is social capital? How is it defined? How – and by whom – is it used? Capital is that form of wealth which is reproducible. Social capital is that form of wealth derived from the possession of a large number of social network connections, connections which become a form of wealth because they allow the person at the centre of them to draw on, call on, a large variety of tangible and intangible resources. Or as Bourdieu puts it:

Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital, a “credential” which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word. (Bourdieu 1986)

Bourdieu's introduction of this concept into social thought is not as innovative as it might at first appear. Portes argues that it merely builds on older assumptions at the heart of sociology

and anthropology, assumptions about the nature and consequences of human sociability (Portes 1998). What Bourdieu's ideas involved, however, was an instrumentalisation of this concept, allowing it to be used in a more focussed and forensic sense (Portes 1998: 3). In the decade after the publication of Bourdieu's paper, there was very widespread interest in, and use of, the social capital concept in both social science research, and in the development of social policy in various parts of the world. Michael Woolcock, for example, was concerned with problems of economic and social development in the Global South, and believed that social capital might provide a key to unlock the research questions and policy conundrums which confronted anyone interested in those problems.

Woolcock on Social Capital at the end of the Twentieth Century

Woolcock, writing at the end of the 1990s, began by contrasting the "Darwinian" conditions of social life in an highly impoverished Indian rural community in Madras with the apparently developed and orderly Changi airport of Singapore. Within the Indian peasant community, local emic explanations for its 'miserable conditions' revolved around the proposition that 'most people simply cannot be trusted', and the evidence for this proposition ranged from persistent non-attendance at their workplaces by teachers and health workers, to chronic corruption and brutality on the part of the local police. Woolcock saw these deficiencies as the result of social capital's absence in this particular social context:

In the apparent absence of what an increasing number of social scientists now refer to as "social capital" – generally defined as information, trust, and norms of reciprocity inhering in one's social networks – seemingly obvious opportunities for mutually beneficial collective action are squandered.

This squandering of collective opportunities was not confined to the case of Madras, and was directly related to the persistence of poverty in the developing world, a persistence that presented a challenge to conventional theories of social and economic development in the Third World. Both analysis and policy were relevant here, or rather the concept of social capital had relevance for social science analysis and economic development policy. Low levels of social capital were correlated with, and seemed to be causally related to, persistent poverty. Therefore the route out of poverty and underdevelopment would appear to lie in the creation and enhancement of social capital. How this might be done, however, is an open question. Reviewing problems with the social capital concept as it was generally used in the late 1990s, Woolcock argued that what was required was a new synthesis of the various elements brought together under the umbrella of that concept, and that he had been able to achieve just such a refinement, via a new synthesis. The problems he identified with the social capital concept were real: the synthesis he developed as a solution to those problems was questionable.

The problems just referred to were many. If social capital is defined as trust derived from interactions, how then do we distinguish between the “sources” social capital and the benefits that are presumed to flow from it? Is it possible that we have neglected the negative aspects that may be a part of social capital, when individuals find themselves trapped in social networks that lay heavy obligations on them, hindering their individual advancement or participation in other, broader, social networks. Furthermore, why is it that social capital was, at the end of the twentieth century being brandished by political ideologies that were mutually irreconcilable? Political conservatives such as Francis Fukuyama were as keen on social capital (Fukuyama 1995) as liberals such as Woolcock himself. Social capital can therefore, Woolcock noted, be used to “justify contradictory public-policy measures”, a fact that is rooted in the fact that state-society relationships are integral to theories of social capital

for development. For those who see the state as inherently destructive of social autonomy and social capital, the interactions arising out of the state-society relationship are a “zero-sum game”, while for those more optimistic about the positive role the state can play, the game played between state and society is a “positive-sum” one.

Woolcock is aligned with the latter camp, as can be seen in his discussion of problems inherent in the social capital concept itself. While at first sight a seemingly obvious proposition concerning the fact that all human beings are embedded in various kinds of social relationships through which they access the means to satisfy needs, it is also rooted in sociological traditions which have mutually incompatible conceptions of the nature of human social reality, and which draw mutually irreconcilable theoretical and political conclusions from those conceptions. Rational choice theorists, for example, view Social Capital as an “informational resource”, one that is produced by the interaction of rational agents “needing to coordinate for mutual benefit” (Woolcock 1998: 155 – 156). Durkheimians, on the other hand, view social capital as the non-contractual elements of contract, while network theorists see social capital as merely an individual’s stock of “non-rational social ties” (Ibid: 156). Reviewing this part of the theoretical landscape, Woolcock concludes that “if social capital can be rational, pre-rational, or even non-rational, what is it not?” (Ibid: 156). Unless some refinement of the concept can be achieved, social capital would appear to be one of those concepts which, while purporting to explain everything, fails to explain anything. That refinement might be best attained by examining cases where the social capital concept has been introduced to understand political situations that cannot be depicted in an optimistic manner, as Woolcock displayed in his attempted synthesis

Woolcock’s synthesis involved a reconciliation of embeddedness (the degree and nature of enmeshment in wider social contexts) and autonomy (where the limits of such enmeshment are revealed). This proposed reconciliation would proceed via an identification

of four factors. These were: integration within communities; linkages beyond the community; synergistic relationships between society and the state; and, finally, the integrity of bodies displaying ‘corporate cohesion’. The first two of these factors are identified by Woolcock from an account of the experience of economic advancement by immigrant ethnic groups. Those groups that are able to achieve such advancement in the potentially hostile environment of the new societies they inhabit do so by first of all by building strong internal links within their community, and then reaching out to the wider society around them. These are two forms of social capital, ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ social capital (Ostrom and Ahn 2008). Bonding capital is based on ‘strong ties between immediate family members, neighbours and close friends’ and where present it provides a structure of support which ‘guards against the vulnerability of the poor’ (Cleaver 2005). Bridging capital, meanwhile, is created via the formation of ‘widespread networks connecting individuals who do not live in the same community and cannot establish close face-to-face networks’ (Ostrom and Ahn 2008: 11). This form of social can be horizontal, integrating individuals and groups across geographical space, or it can be vertical, integration individuals and communities with the state.

For Woolcock, such cases are relevant to wider issues of development in other parts of the world, specifically in what he designates as the “micro” level of his analysis, where individuals and communities at the base of society engage in daily struggles for survival. This is contrasted to the macro level, where the state is located. This is of vital importance to Woolcock’s model, for he states that

The internal dynamics and development of economic groups in poor communities does not occur in isolation, but rather in the context of a particular history and regulatory framework that can itself strengthen or undermine the capacity of independent groups in civil society to organize in their own collective interest. Such

groups, in turn, can play an important role in shaping government policies and performance. The nature of state-society relations is thus crucial to understanding both the prospects of economic groups and, in turn, their efficacy in shaping the willingness and ability of the state (and other large corporate actors) to act in a developmental manner. The developmental effectiveness of state-society relations therefore turns on the articulation of the interests, needs, and resources of both parties.(Woolcock 1998: 176)

Woolcock is an optimist, and believes that it is possible to achieve such developmentally effective forms of state-society relationships. He admits, however, that the question of how exactly it can be achieved is ‘problematic’, for a number of reasons. One he refers to in his paper of 1998, but which remains undeveloped by him in that paper, is the potential ‘dark side’ of social capital. This is not only due to the ways in which bonding social capital can be organised in ways that inhibit the continued accumulation of economic capital (di Falco and Bulte 2011), but also due to the ways in which the vertically integrating effects of bridging social capital can reinforce political tendencies that rely on, or even reproduce, political malpractice and the abuse of power.

African ‘Big Man’ Politics and Social Capital

The “big man” concept is used in African studies to understand the patterns of political life which involve the accumulation and deployment of patron-client relationships, relationships that revolve around the bargaining of political support by those in weaker social positions for the aid and patronage of those with access to resources derived from their occupation of positions of political power². ‘What the Big Man is primarily aiming at is the constitution of a social capital of loyalties’, as Daloz puts it (2003: 28). Daloz has employed the social capital concept in a review of studies of elites in contemporary Africa and the impact of their

² Such forms of political behaviour are not unique to Africa, and have (for example) been a key feature of political life in the Republic of Ireland since that country’s independence in 1922 (Komito 1984).

personal political strategies on development processes in that continent. Briefly, that impact consists of a contradiction between the imperatives of political accumulation (that is, the accumulation of a set of supporters and followers on which the political leader can draw to build and maintain a position of power), and the imperatives of economic accumulation. Processes of economic accumulation and development imply the accumulation of stocks of economic capital and their investments in continuing cycles of reproduction, in which the sum of capital, measured in monetary or other forms expands. The accumulation of a set of followers requires the disbursement of items of economic wealth and their dispersion throughout the community from which the Big Man hopes to find followers by proving his personal wealth and power (Daloz 2003: 281): ‘it is sometimes difficult to admit that considerable amounts of money are used for the importation of very costly prestige goods or for the organisation of showy parties whilst the majority of the population barely have enough to survive’). Such forms of ‘big man’ politics were widely prevalent in Sierra Leone in the years before the civil war of 1991 – 2002, and the forms of corruption they entailed were a major factor in eroding public trust in the political system (Gberie 2005: 38). That erosion of trust was never fully repaired in the decade that followed the coming of peace to Sierra Leone in 2002, the decade which today appears as the prelude to the EVD crisis of 2013 – 2015 (Richards et al (2015: 6), it should be noted, cite research suggesting relatively high levels of trust in political authorities where reliable information on Ebola transmission is concerned). This highlights the central point about the nature of social capital, that culture is at the heart of the phenomenon in a number of ways, from the particular forms of cultural capital that Bourdieu identifies as related to social capital, and to the wider cultural patterns that shape the social structures and interactions in which social capital is accumulated and deployed.

For Bourdieu, such forms of capital are intimately related to economic and social capital, and the key defining feature is that they are used by individuals to acquire and defend particular

social statuses. In his chapter of 1986, Bourdieu describes cultural capital as, amongst other things, something convertible into economic capital via the acquisition of its institutionalized form, educational qualifications (Bourdieu 1986: 16). This institutionalization is one of several forms of objectification which cultural capital can take: others include the condensation of cultural value in items of material culture, as ‘cultural goods’ such as books and artworks, and also the embodied forms of cultural capital, ‘long- lasting dispositions of the mind and body’ (Bourdieu 1986: 17). This would seem to be an exhaustive listing of the various form which culture in general, and not only cultural capital, can take, but the precision of Bourdieu’s position can be seen in the original use he made of it. Bourdieu states that his original purpose in deploying the concept of cultural capital was to explain cross-class inequalities in educational attainment, inequalities which could not, he believed, be adequately by either ‘natural attributes’ or theories of ‘human capital’. He saw the social landscape of post-war France (the area where this work was carried out) as an arena for this battle for status, one in which an expanding economy created opportunities for social mobility. Education in this context was vital not only for its directly economic rewards, but also for the ways in which it allowed the conversion of economic into cultural capital and thus into social capital.

The forms of cultural capital identified by Bourdieu, then, seem to me to be only the fungible derivations of wider cultural fields. Such fields have been studied in the Eritrean case by Gaim Kibreab. In his book *Critical Reflections on the Eritrean War of Independence: social capital, associational life, religion, ethnicity and sowing the seeds of dictatorship*, he argues that the various ethnic groups that make up the population of Eritrea have various cultural practices which allow for the accumulation and enhancement of social capital (Kibreab 2008). This, he believes, may provide the basis for the democratic transition which Eritrea sorely requires. Kibreab’s argument relies on an analysis of the cultural heritages of

the various ethnic groups which make up Eritrea's population of around 6 million. He sees

these groups as possessing cultural practices of co-operation and mutual aid which allow them to build the relationships of trust which are vital to the transition he seeks in Eritrea. Among these cultural practices, are mutual cooperation groups such as *mahbers*, where non-kin related persons create informal associations for the purpose of collective risk pooling.

Each member of the Mahber makes a periodic contribution of a specific amount of money and benefits are paid out to members in money, or in kind, in the event of the loss of a job, an accident, illness or death. Mahber also provides financial credits to its members at times when they face serious crises . . . It forests social relationships among people with common neighbourhood, ethnic, religious, or family ties, which constitutes important sources of security, mutual help, and conviviality (Habtom and Ruys 2007)

Habtom and Ruys (2007) identify these groups as key to the production of systems of informal health insurance in Eritrea. However, as Kibreab has argued the strength and prevalence of these groups in Eritrea is a by-product of the prolonged war of Eritrean liberation. It is, therefore, a unique cultural product of a unique historical experience.

In other words, any analysis using social capital as a concept must base itself, first of all, on the local cultural environment with which that analysis is concerned. Like social network theory, on which it draws, social capital theory can lend itself to mathematical modelling, but even though such forms of modelling can produce highly rigorous and complex models of social life. There are, however, limits to which mathematical analysis alone can enhance the understanding of social interaction in the absence of a ‘grasp upon culture, agency and process’ (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994). This is recognised by, for example, Julia Häuberer, in her monograph on social capital theory (Häuberer 2011), builds up complex mathematical models for measuring trust in contemporary Czech Republic. At

the same time as she does this, however, she is careful to note the historical processes that shaped popular conceptions of trust in the Czech Republic today, specifically the historical experience of several decades spent as part of a Czechoslovakia which was under the political domination of the Soviet Union, when that country was ruled by a single-party regime. This political history leaves citizens of the contemporary Czech Republic to cynicism and ‘passivity’ concerning the possibility of active engagement in formal social networks of a civic nature (Haüberer 2011: 181). In other words, as she puts it, the ‘historical, economical [*sic*] and technological background of the Czechs led and still leads to bigger informal networks in the Czech republic’ (Haüberer 2011: 181). These informal networks are the major route for the accumulation of social capital in that particular social context, and the convergence on informal rather than formal networks was driven by the cultural context of contemporary Czech society.

If the purpose of this paper has been to organize some thoughts on how social capital theory can contribute to the study of the West African EVD crisis, then the preceding pages suggest that that contribution can best be made by some combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. Chen, et al., for example, have developed a personal social capital scale with which they propose to measure individual’s personal stocks of social capital via a battery of questions which measure variables such as ‘people skills’ and ‘social contact’ (Chen, Stanton et al. 2009). Methods such as this do seem to have a role to play in the study of social capital in the midst of disasters such as that which struck Sierra Leone and its neighbours in 2014. Any comprehensive assessment of the nature of that disaster, however, will need to take into account the kinds of cultural phenomena which are the subject of qualitative research methods. In the next section I discuss how this might proceed in the case of the countries affected by the worst EVD epidemic in history.

Social Capital and Epidemics

As noted above, the 2013 – 2015 EVD epidemic in West Africa was the most severe, and most deadly, outbreak of the disease since it was first identified in what was then Zaire in the mid-1970s. The roots of the extreme consequences of this outbreak lie in decades of public mistrust of the state, and in a long-term, general decline in the health infrastructure of the affected nations. This latter factor was especially acute in the case of Sierra Leone and Liberia, which had gone through many years of civil war, before finally achieving peace at the beginning of the present century. The Ebola crisis looks like to set back development and growth in all the affected countries, and the consequences and outcomes of the epidemic are likely to be as unpredictable as the extent of the epidemic was itself. For those aspiring to conduct research on the problem of this epidemic, and its implications for the peoples and communities it has shaken, this poses the question of what concepts should be employed in trying to trace both the origins and course of the epidemic and in assessing the condition of the societies that have passed through that epidemic and emerged, changed, into a new environment. In the following paragraphs, I present some thoughts on the relevance of the Social Capital concept to this problem.

As noted above, in the review of the work of Woolcock and others, it became clear that the concept of social capital was in danger of being reduced to a ‘buzz-word’ or piece of jargon, an item of linguistic usage which works to substitute for thought rather than to enhance. There are, however, good reasons for believing that the concept of social capital may be highly relevant to the study of epidemics as social and cultural phenomenon. Viruses are protein and acid chains that lack the capacity to reproduce themselves and must therefore rely on the cells they parasitize to do so (Widmaier 2006: 688). They therefore require physical contact between their hosts to reproduce and spread through a population. This is emphasised in the ways in which local cultural practices around funeral practices have been

identified as a major source of transmission of the Ebola virus (such practices involve the handling of corpses in ways that create grave risks of infection). Furthermore, the patterns of viral spreading in any disease are seen as patterns of network infection: the identification of the 'patient zero' of the current outbreak involved tracing the social connections of infected persons back to the site where the present outbreak started, in the border zone where Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone meet.

If the accumulation of network ties is at the heart of social capital, then it would seem that such capital may render individuals and populations susceptible to viral infection, and makes them peculiarly at risk of acting as vectors of transmission for viruses. This, however, is contradicted by the findings of various studies which argue that the presence of high levels of social capital in communities appears to correlate with lower incidences of viral disease. In a statistical analysis of rates of gonorrhoea and syphilis in different states of the USA, Semaan et al hypothesize that 'higher social capital is associated with better health outcomes, through positive social norms, social networks, social support and the availability of strong organizational processes' influencing the availability and use of health care services' (2007 (Semaan, Sternberg et al. 2007)). Gonorrhoea and syphilis are bacterial rather than viral diseases, but as sexually transmitted diseases they share patterns of transmission via sexual activity with Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). In the case of HIV, too, social capital has been used to analyse patterns of HIV transmission and identify areas of risk: in South Africa, for example, it was argued that certain forms of social capital, those involving civic participation, may reduce the risk of HIV infection, while others (e.g. participation in social alcohol consumption) appear to increase that risk (Poundstone, Strathdee et al. 2004).

Another factor to consider is that efforts to contain the spread of the virus may themselves be corrosive of the social capital on which communities may rely. Such communities not only have well established patterns of mistrust of authorities, but they also

rely on events such as funerals for the ritual maintenance of social ties and social trust. Any attempt to mandate an end to particular funeral practices (even if those practices act as vectors for disease) is likely to be resisted or evaded. Furthermore, the removal of infected persons from their communities to quarantine sites is also likely to be seen as violation of both communities as a whole and of the individual rights of those persons.

Not all viral diseases are the same; they do not all spread in the same fashion, nor do they have all the same effects on the societies through which they spread. This simply serves to underline, however, the need to understand the specific local contexts (social and cultural alike) in which viral diseases can achieve epidemic rates of infection. Local particularities will not only leave their stamp on local cases of epidemic infections, but also on the nature (or existence) of forms of social capital that might either encourage such infections, or provide a means to combat them.

Conclusion

The international response to the outbreak of EVD in Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia was initially sluggish, slow and inadequate. This undoubtedly led to a worsening of the crisis, allowing it to build to a level of severity which meant that affected states struggled to effectively contain the virus. This was due not only to the limited capacity of those states to respond to any public health emergency, but also because of the lack of the kind of social capital which might have aided that response. An earlier halting of the spread of the virus would have required not only the deployment of a much superior level of resources, but also much greater public compliance with the anti-Ebola effort than was, in reality, the case. The lack of public compliance with quarantine measures, the prevalence of conspiracy theories and even (in the case of one isolated incident in Guinea) the murderous attacks on health workers, were all signs of the reduced or absent public trust of a sort that could integrate local

communities in a vertical fashion with public bodies charged with the anti-Ebola campaign. In other words, they were a product of the absence of bridging social capital. The rapid and very extensive spread of the virus, which drove the casualty numbers into the several thousands (a sharp contrast with previous outbreaks of the virus, which had been contained before killing more than a few), was enabled, arguably, by the prevalence of bonding social capital. This is suggested by the fact that the virus is spread by physical contact, including contact of an intimate nature, between persons connected by strong social bonds and connections. As we have seen, the enhancement and extension of social capital has been promoted as a key tool in development strategies everywhere, both in general, and with regard to the improvement of health outcomes. Optimistic accounts of social capital and its social relevance (such as that of Woolcock) might be accused of assuming that the mere presence of social capital can be taken for granted as a positive and good thing. It may be, however, that not all forms of social capital may be present in a community, or that they may even contradict one another. The existence of forms of bonding social capital amongst Sierra Leonean communities, for example, is connected to their alienation from the state, and the two may well reinforce each other. The concepts of trust which are at the heart of social capital, and which are inherited in forms of cultural practices and cultural capital, may take forms which lead to enhanced trust and strengthened ties within communities, while at the same time reducing trust and weakening ties between communities and each other, and between communities and the state.

Future research on the connection between social capital and the present epidemic in West Africa will need to consider not only the quantitative aspect of social capital (through assessments of the extent and strength of network links), but also qualitative aspects of social capital as well. Studies of the latter aspect will need to understand, in other words, what trust

means in the affected communities, and what it means to the members of those communities to trust persons within one's community, and beyond it.

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