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**SOCIAL CAPITAL AND EQUALITY:  
TOCQUEVILLE'S LEGACY**

**Rethinking social capital in relation with income inequalities**

Emanuele FERRAGINA\*

Susanne Langer (1942), in her book *Philosophy in a New Key*, describes how certain ideas emerge in the intellectual debate; they seem to promise that they will resolve all fundamental problems, clarify all obscure issues. “Everyone snaps them up as the open sesame of some new positive science, the conceptual centre-point around which a comprehensive system of analysis can be built” (Geertz, 1973:3). The strength of these new paradigms crowd out all other theories for a while, but after gaining familiarity with them, we realize that they cannot solve our intellectual problems and excessive popularity progressively ends. Only at this stage is a more settled reflection on a new paradigm possible. Social Capital concept, doubtless, falls into this category of ideas. After two decades of intense debate, we may analyse it without overemphasis, pointing out the importance of its emergence, its historical roots but also the limit of its use.

The modern emergence of this concept renewed academic interest for an old debate in social science: the relationship between trust, social networks and the development of modern industrial societies. Social capital theory has gained importance mainly, through the integration of classical sociological theory with the description of an intangible form of capital. In this way the classical definition of capital has been overcome allowing us to tackle social issues in a new manner.

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The opportunity to adapt the concept to many phenomena relies on the intrinsic multidimensional nature of this form of capital (Putnam, 1993). Social capital has been used widely to enlighten the following topics<sup>1</sup>: differences in economic development (Woolcock and Narayan, 2000; Putnam, 1993; Dasgupta, 1997), policies of local development (Hanifan, 1916; Trigiglia, 2001), integration of social networks into the definition of the utility function of individuals (Becker, 1996; Coleman, 1988-1990), the importance of traditional community values (Fukuyama, 1995), social class perpetuation and social immobility (Bourdieu, 1980), the decline of 'civicness' and generalized trust in developed countries (Putnam, 1993-1995-2000) and the relationship between generalized trust in society and the development of efficient institutions (Rothstein, 2001).

Therefore, the use of social capital in many contexts has resulted in some confusion and misuse. In order to find a clear definition, to operationalize the concept and create instruments of measurement (Putnam, 1993; Paxton, 1999; Costa and Kahn, 2003; Hall, 1999; Rothstein, 2001; Knack and Keefer, 1997; Van Oorschot and Art, 2005; Beugelsdijk, Van Schaik, 2005) a long and intense debate has been generated, engaging scholars with different backgrounds.

This passionate participation in the debate has heavily impacted on the connotation of the concept and social capital progressively become a device to engage in strong 'ideological debates', leading to the re-elaboration of old theories with intensive data analysis. The most famous and debated conceptualization, that of Robert Putnam (1993, 2000), explains this development well. It had been conceived, in fact, with a 'strong ideological flavour' and presented as an original and objective reflection on the absence of collective actions in certain Italian regions and the decline of trust in American society. His reflection, instead, calls to mind old theories<sup>2</sup>, replacing some old-fashioned terms<sup>3</sup> and shifting the interest of the debate from 'collective and structural problems' to the 'individual decisions of citizens'.

The purpose of this paper, in this regard, is to reflect theoretically upon the development of the social capital concept and its relation with income inequalities, in order to clarify the dangers of an 'overly culturalistic' vision, which does not take into account the structural problems of our society. The dimension of inequalities, in this

context, has been deliberately left out of the debate only for 'ideological reasons'. To clarify this argument, we need to revisit classical sociological theory in relation with social capital debate and Putnam's conceptualization, to point out at the end new paths for further research.

#### HISTORICAL EMERGENCE OF THE CONCEPT

The social capital concept is linked to an old debate, and attempts to propose a synthesis between the values contained in the communitarian approaches and individualism professed by the 'Rational Choice Theory'. In fact, social capital can only be generated collectively thanks to the presence of communities, or particular networks, but individuals and groups can exploit it at the same time. Individuals can use the social capital of their networks to achieve 'private' objectives and groups can use it to enforce a certain set of norms or behaviours. In this sense, social capital is generated collectively but it can also be used individually, bridging the dichotomized approach 'communitarianism' versus 'individualism'.

Historically, the power of 'community governance' has been stressed by many philosophers from Antiquity to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, from Aristotle to Thomas Aquinas and Edmund Burke (Bowles and Gintis, 2002). This vision was strongly criticized at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the development of the idea of the *Homo Economicus* and subsequently with 'Rational Choice Theory'. Such a set of theories became dominant in the last centuries, but many thinkers questioned the complicated relationship between 'modern society' and the importance of 'old institutions'.<sup>4</sup>

In this regard, the debate 'community versus modernization of society and individualism' has been the most discussed topic among the founding fathers of sociology (Tönnies, 1887; Durkheim 1893; Simmel, 1905; Weber 1922, 1946). They were obsessed with the idea that industrialization and urbanization were transforming social relationships in an irreversible way. They observed a breakdown of traditional bonds and the progressive development of anomie and alienation in society (Willmott, 1986).

The distinction that Tönnies (1887) made between 'Gemeinschaft' and 'Gesellschaft', illustrating the historical shift from the community to the modern society, is particularly interesting. The attributes of the

first term<sup>5</sup> differ from the less bonding attributes associated with the second term, symbol of the modern society. This distinction, in fact, is widely used in the modern analysis of social capital, Putnam calls it to mind using the term bonding (which is similar to Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft*) and bridging (which is similar to Tönnies' *Gesellschaft*).

Weber in his essay "Churches and Sects" (1946) highlighted, well in advance of social capital theorists, how religious sects formed robust informal networks able to enforce rules and create relationships among the members. Weber distinguished the sects from the churches for their 'exclusivity' and their ability to create a barrier to access. Churches, according to the German sociologist, were too 'inclusive and ascriptive' (Cornwell, 2007) to generate 'closeness' in the network. Bourdieu (1980) will emphasize this aspect, many years later, underlying how 'closeness' and 'exclusivity' are the most important characteristics that allow groups to create club goods like social capital.

After Tönnies's and Weber's works, reflection on social links in modern society continued with interesting contributions in the 1950s and 1960s, in particular with the 'The Mass Society Theory' (Bell, 1962; Nisbet, 1969; Stein, 1960; Whyte, 1956). They proposed themes similar to those of the 'founding fathers', placing a pessimistic emphasis on the development of society and its desegregation. Modernization inevitably leads to confusion and disorganization, which is why it was important to return to communitarian values. In the words of Stein (1960:1): "The price for maintaining a society that encourages cultural differentiation and experimentation is unquestionably the acceptance of a certain amount of disorganization on both the individual and social level". All these reflections contribute remarkably to the development of the social capital concept in the following decades.

The appearance of modern social capital conceptualization is, in fact, a new way to look at this debate, keeping together the importance of community to build generalized trust and at the same time, the importance of individual free choice, in order to create a more cohesive society. It is for this reason that social capital generated so much interest in the academic and political world (Rose, 2000).

The first appearance of the concept, with the exception of Hanifan<sup>6</sup> (1916), is at the beginning of 1960's in a famous book by Jane Jacobs (1961) called *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Social capital is used as a device to criticize the artificial development of American cities. Urban spaces were designed without taking into account pre-existing social links, destroying a capital which would be impossible to reproduce. Jacobs proposes a constructive way to look at social relationships, as a factor to consider in city planning and as an important value to be kept in modern societies.

After Jacobs' contribution, it is only with Bourdieu (1980) twenty years later, that the concept assume its actual ideological and theoretical connotation standing in the midst of sociological debate, affirming the importance of traditional institutions and affiliation to communities also in a modern society.

Before Bourdieu, some authors highlighted the impact of social relations in social structure and public policies, without using the word social capital but describing similar phenomena. Particularly insightful have been the contributions of Bott (1957) and Mitchell (1969) to reflect upon how external relationships transform private institution; Granovetter (1973) who bridged the gulf between micro and macro in his analysis of the labour market, and finally Banfield (1958).

*The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (Banfield, 1958) is the basis for Putnam's modern conceptualization. Banfield analysed a small village in 'Basilicata', in order to explain the absence of 'collective actions' in Southern Italy. Putnam (1993), 35 years later, re-formulated the indicators<sup>7</sup> created by Banfield using a quantitative flavour. He described, contrary to his predecessor at Harvard, using a macro-context, the different institutional performance of Italian regions after their institution in the 1970's. *Making Democracy Work* is the first attempt to measure social capital and its impact on political institutions. His controversial contribution has the merit of introducing a quantitative dimension in the debate on social capital.

Looking at this long debate, we can reclaim the historical importance of the term, stating that social capital is a new concept generated from an old idea.

## THE RISE OF THE MODERN DEBATE

The modern debate on social capital arose after the publication of a short two-page article by Bourdieu (1980). In his provisional notes on social capital, the French sociologist defined the concept, giving to it visibility and recognition at an academic level. Social capital, in his vision, is constituted by the resources actually or potentially owned, which are related to the possession of a durable network of relations (institutionalized or not). In other words social capital is created through the belonging to some group, where people are endowed with common properties and also with permanent and stable links.

Bourdieu inserted social capital theory in the context of the reproduction of social status, as a determining factor of stratification. According to him, social capital is a factor that increases inequalities in society, giving a tool to 'upper class people' to reproduce their own status. After this article many scholars concentrated their efforts on the analysis of social capital, basing their research on strong ideological positions.

The main contemporary approaches on social capital analysis originate from different points of view on many important aspects: the role of the individual in society and their duties (Fukuyama, 1995; Pizzorno, 1999, Sudgen, 2000); their capacity to make 'rational choices' and the impact they receive from different groups (Coleman, 1990; Becker, 1996); the evaluation of the institutional role (Woolcock and Narayan, 2000; Rothstein and Stolle, 2003) and the Welfare State (Van Oorschot and Arts, 2005); the importance attributed to 'strong and weak ties' (Granovetter, 1973); the perpetual tension between community and society (Bagnasco, 1999); its possible negative impact (Portes, 1998); the evolution of a neo-capital theory that postulates the shift from a class-based to an actor-based perspective (Lin, 2000).

In this way, the social capital concept helped many scholars explain their vision. It provided an important impulse in the development of new ways of thinking in sociology, economy and political science. Good examples of innovation inspired from the notion of social capital are the introduction of social relations in the individual utility function by Becker (1996) and Coleman (1990) and the important debate on public policy, systems of governance and informal networks.



The social capital concept nevertheless has to be looked at critically too. It inherently hides, in fact, the will of many scholars to come back to the old discussion of community versus society. This point has been clearly highlighted by Thomson (2005), in his article, "The Theory That Won't Die: From Mass Society to the Decline of Social Capital". She clearly linked the emergence of the social capital concept to the debates that took place in the 1950's and in the 1960's around mass society theory<sup>8</sup>. In its most famous conceptualization (Putnam; 1993), it has been used instrumentally in order to justify the need for a new vision of the world, in which institutional power and welfare state provisions have a minor role compared to the one reserved to the renewal of civic society through a new communitarian spirit.

Despite the limits of Putnam's definition, social capital can be used in a different way to support new 'intellectual struggles' against social immobility and inequalities, because with it we can go far beyond the analyses based on the other types of capital, revealing new issues by looking at old research topics from a new angle. It is for this reason that Putnam's books have been so hotly debated. His attempt to give a 'quantitative dimension' to the relation between social capital, institutions and social performance, constitutes a valid departure point for new analyses. In what follows, the main criticisms of his famous books are discussed in order to forge a new research path.

#### CRITICISM OF PUTNAM'S SOCIAL CAPITAL VISION AND GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

Putnam's thoughts can only be understood if we look at the evolution of his two most important books: *Making Democracy Work* and *Bowling Alone* (Putnam, 1993, 2000). *Making Democracy Work* (Putnam, 1993) can be considered a valuable exercise in refining the explanatory power of the social capital concept. By following the institution and development of Italian regions from the 1970s, he made a case for measuring the impact of 'cultural and social aspects' on institutional performance. *Making Democracy Work* can be considered a preliminary study to introduce the theoretical tools developed in *Bowling Alone*, in order to analyse the American society.

In fact it is only in *Bowling Alone* (Putnam, 2000) that Putnam's research questions evolve: What has caused the decline<sup>9</sup> of social

capital in the most ‘associative’ democracy<sup>10</sup> since the 1960’s? How can American democracy continue to operate properly? What are the levers to ‘Renew American society’ and escape from the perspective of a disaggregated society? The answer that Putnam gave to these questions began one of the hottest debates in the history of social science not only in the United States, but also in Europe and the rest of the world.

Putnam’s analysis has been challenged at an empirical level by further research in the United States, as shown by Costa and Kahn (2003), who analysed different research projects on social capital. These attempts to measure social capital in the United States led to discordant results. In three of them no change in social capital endowment was found; in another they found an increase. Therefore the authors obtained a mix of stability and decline and only Putnam found a strong decline.

Paxton’s article (1999) “Is Social Capital Declining in the United States? A Multiple Indicator Assessment”, takes particular issue with Putnam’s analysis. She contested Putnam’s results, highlighting a point that will be central in this discussion: that the decline appears only in marginalized people and not among the entire American population.

In Europe many scholars have tried to provide similar measurements, initially for countries; England (Hall, 1999) and Sweden (Rothstein, 2001); then for the rest of Europe, looking also at the impact of the Welfare State (Van Oorshot, 2005). However none of them found a decline to be taking place.

Strong and radical critiques come from other scholars, who have argued that many of Putnam’s arguments are based more on normative judgements rather than empirical evidence. From a methodological point of view the critiques of O’Connell (2003) and Knack and Keefer (1997) are very interesting. According to them we cannot explain every economic improvement in terms of social capital and association density<sup>11</sup>.

The critiques that follow are presented in four groups. The first argues that there is a strong incoherence between *Making democracy work* and *Bowling Alone*; the second that the ‘ideological’ use of social capital goes back to communitarian theories; thirdly that there are

'normative' judgements on the relations between government intervention and the social capital endowment of a nation; finally, and the most significant for this discussion, is the use of social capital theory to shift the attention from structural and collective problems of Western democracies, such as economic inequalities, to individual issues of responsibility.

INCOHERENCE BETWEEN *MAKING DEMOCRACY WORK* AND *BOWLING ALONE*

The first problem highlighted by the appearance of the article "Bowling Alone" (Putnam, 1995) is the incongruity with *Making Democracy Work* (Putnam, 1993). The strong contradiction was pinpointed by Lemann (1996) in his article "Kicking in Groups", in which he draws a comparison between the works of Putnam (1993, 1995) and Banfield (1958, 1970), showing that Putnam used a different logic and methodology to analyse social capital evolution in the United States and in Italy.

The need to 'Renew American Society' appears stronger than the historical determinism showed in *Making Democracy Work* (Lemann, 1996:24). History and the system of government in place 900 years ago still have an impact on the difference of social capital among Italian regions, but in the United States the American scholar observed a fast decline in 40 years. Why is it that in Italy he applied a 'path dependency theory' and in the United States social capital appears to be in rapid decline?

Putnam's idea seems to be constructed to show that the United States has the possibility for a complete renewal; it seems to be a theory built to put new hope in social links and the power of associations.<sup>12</sup> Following the logic of *Making Democracy Work* would have meant to describe an irreversible decline; social capital is in fact the product of a long and intense history. For this reason Putnam's incoherence shows how all the quantitative analyses are in reality driven by a strong political message: to give the United States new motivation to re-launch social relations and the old character of the nation admired by Tocqueville at the begin of 19<sup>th</sup> century.

A second argument used by Lemann (1996) to demonstrate Putnam's incoherence, can be shown if we compare his books with Banfield's analysis. Banfield (1958, 1970, 1974) applied the same

deterministic theory to explain the backwardness of people in southern Italy and in American ghettos. The result was massive criticism and accusation of racism for his controversial book *The Unheavenly City*. Lemann suggested that *Bowling Alone* avoids Banfield's problem.

A true application of the line of thinking in *Making Democracy Work* would require searching in the United States for internal differences in the civic virtue and then trying to explain those differences. One inevitable result would be the shining of a harsh spotlight on the ghettos, with their high rates of crime, welfare dependency, and family break up (Lemann; 1996: 26).

Putnam doesn't consider different economic conditions and the lack of social capital of poor families in the urban ghettos and in this way avoids Banfield's problem.

In fact, Banfield (1974) is 'deterministic' in his judgement of the situation in urban ghettos, making a parallel between the condition of poor families in Basilicata and those in American towns. Everything in his analysis is dependent on cultural factors which reproduce themselves. He was accused of racism, for this vision but as shown by Lemann he kept, contrarily to Putnam, a coherent link between the two analyses.

Putnam tried to answer these criticisms, (Putnam, 2001) showing how states have a different endowment of social capital directly dependent on historical and cultural factors. He uses the particular case of Utah, where the historical presence of Mormons has strongly impacted on the actual endowment of social capital. However not a line was dedicated to increasing income inequalities in his country and different living conditions among its citizens. What was not considered was the lack of public services, the absence of a national health service, the fact that US has the highest Gini coefficient among Western countries (Weinberg, 1996:1).

What is highlighted instead is the decrease of social capital due to the effect of the modernization of society<sup>13</sup> in the last forty years. In the chapter called "What Killed Civic Engagement? Summing Up" (2000: 277-284) Putnam calculated how much these variables have roughly contributed to this decline, keeping a margin of uncertainty of 10%. How is it possible to enumerate the factors that lead to a

disengagement with civic life and measure their impact without using any rigorous methodology?

For this reason Putnam's contribution has to be considered more an 'ideological vision' than an effective demonstration of decline of social capital. Decrease of reciprocity and decline of mutual trust is not a new idea.<sup>14</sup> It seems that Putnam returns to old sociological theories which emphasized the passage from a 'traditional' to a 'modern' society trying to demonstrate that community values are still important. Therefore, he proposed a decisive shift in social capital theory. Bourdieu (1980, 1986) and Coleman (1990) in their works, in fact, proposed social capital as an explanatory variable useful to understand some phenomena in society and not as a 'fundamental tool' for the 'renewal of a whole country'.

#### A ROMANTIC COMEBACK TO COMMUNITARIANISM

The need for intermediary groups between the individuals and society was pinpointed by Durkheim (1893) more than a century ago. The fear of social disintegration in the passage from a 'mechanic society' to a 'modern one' was already current at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century.

For the French sociologist a nation can work properly only thanks to the mediation of secondary groups which are necessary bodies to interconnect 'atomistic individuals' to the life of a nation. A society that refused this model would constitute a 'veritable sociological monster'. More than a century ago Durkheim, unconsciously, was highlighting one of the main points of social capital theory: the importance of social links in the functioning of a nation:

A society composed of an infinite number of unorganized individuals, that a hypertrophied state is forced to oppress and contain, constitutes a veritable sociological monstrosity [...] A nation can be maintained only if between the state and the individual, there is interlaced a whole series of secondary groups near enough to the individuals to attract them strongly in their sphere of action and drag them, in this way, into the general torrent of social life<sup>15</sup> (Durkheim; 1893 vol. I: 29).

This idea continued to fascinate sociologists after World War II, producing the advent of mass society theory. During the 1950's and 1960's the development of mass society theory (Bell, 1962; Nisbet, 1969; Stein, 1960; Whyte, 1956) represented the fear of the desegregation of society due to the modernization of life habits. This

idea is not so different from that highlighted by Fukuyama (1995) and Putnam (2001). Nevertheless, Mass Society Theorists proposed more pessimistic analyses of the 'modern man'. Books like *American as Mass Society* (Bell, 1962), *The Eclipse of Community* (Stein, 1960), *The Organization Man* (Whyte, 1956) illustrate the consequence of a society where men are isolated and disconnected from their community.

Particularly important in this debate was Nisbet's contribution (1969). In his famous book *The Quest for Community*, he compared the different philosophical ideas which are the basis of individualism and communitarianism. According to him, there is a need to defend the forgotten traditional values of communities, from the strong emphasis that have been given in modern societies to concepts like progress, reason and freedom (Nisbet, 1969:10). According to Nisbet, freedom resulted in 'disenchantment' and 'alienation'; men lost traditional ties without substituting them. 'Disenchantment' and 'alienation' are caused by the lack of certitude connected with freedom; this is the price to pay for modernity.

Nisbet goes forward looking with nostalgia at the image of the man in the past: the idea of 'inadequate man', 'insufficient man', 'disenchanted man' are part of 20<sup>th</sup> century discourse. In the past, the debate was dominated by the idea of a 'natural man', 'economic and political man'; all images which provide a positive idea of social connectedness.

However, neither Nisbet nor other scholars of this school of thought have been able to demonstrate their propositions on the increasing isolation and the decline of trust in society (Thomson; 2005). For this reason the debate slowly disappeared among scholars, to re-appear in the 1990's in a new form. Thomson (2005:422) argues for continuity between mass society theory and the decline of the social capital theory postulated by Putnam. Both theories highlight the importance of secondary groups and current reduction of those ties in society. In fact in Putnam's opinion people in the United States are less connected to their communities than four decades ago. But the 'new theory' of social capital (Thomson 2005) presents important differences from the previous one.

First of all, the massive presence of data and empirical analysis (Thomson, 2005: 425), even if the presence of this evidence has not been useful in providing clear answers, was more objective. However,

the decline of social capital in the United States remains questionable, as already mentioned (Paxton, 2000).

Secondly, the suppression of the use of the word 'alienation', substituted by 'lack of trust' (Thomson, 2005:435) makes it clear that Putnam wants to give a more optimistic vision. There is desegregation but individuals can change the situation; the alienation of individuals from their own communities is not an irreversible process. In fact, the third difference between mass society and social capital theory is the agency attributed to individuals (Thomson, 2005:436): people have the freedom to reduce social links. In mass society theory, instead, individuals were considered as part of a changing social structure. The effects of desegregation in society presented by Putnam and Fukuyama are similar to the ones presented by mass society scholars, but in the new theory the individual controls of the situation. They can decide to destroy social links and break relations with the traditional communities and associations. In this way 'alienation' is no longer a collective problem, but isolation comes from the lack of trust and integration in associations, so it is only an 'individual problem'.

In this sense, Putnam's vision is very appealing. Firstly, because responsibility is no longer in the hands of public powers. The individual has 'agency' and doesn't need any structure; he can freely decide to renew democracy and communities. Secondly it confirms fears which are part of our basic assumptions; everyone wants to maintain security nets to counterbalance uncertainty provoked by the modernization of society. As underlined by Thomson, "theories that won't die are those that confirm our most basic assumptions" (Thomson, 2005: 443).

In this clear framework, an important big doubt remains. Putnam doesn't explain to us why social capital is unequally distributed among social classes (Bourdieu, 1980). Should we think that the lack of social capital in lower classes depends upon the freedom of choice of individuals? Should we think that public powers must give free agency to individuals to make their own choices without supporting people who are less likely to take advantage of their social networks? And above all, are governments solely responsible for the destruction of social capital and associationism? At this stage an analysis of public policy impact on social capital would be appropriate.

## GOVERNMENTAL ROLE IN GENERATING TRUST AND RECIPROCITY

The critique of central government, in terms of its destruction of trust and reciprocity among citizens, is very old, dating back to 1835. Tocqueville, with his masterpiece, *De la Démocratie en Amérique* (Tocqueville, 1960), demonstrated how the role of government in American society was less invasive than in France, giving individuals more opportunity to create free associations.

According to Tocqueville, with the progressive development of democratic governments, the responsibility of every individual toward the rest of the population would have become much clearer and dedication to duties for a single person less common and substituted by a central organization (Tocqueville, 1960: 97). However, a government would never be able to rebuild those links of solidarity, even if it would provide the same services. A central power can only impose rules and destroys the ‘circulation of communitarian values’ and informal relations. In the context of a strong central organization, people would only be interested in helping individuals in their close network, all the others will become like foreigners<sup>16</sup> (Tocqueville, 1960: 97).

However, the critiques that Tocqueville made of central government have to be considered in their own historical context, not misused and stretched to explain the modern evolution of our society. The French writer was conditioned in his judgment by the strong centralization of powers that operated in his country following the French revolution. For him the only way to increase the well-being of a country was through the strong presence of associations, in order to increase horizontal links able to counterbalance the vertical power of ‘democratic institutions’.<sup>17</sup>

In recent years, the same argument that Tocqueville used against democracy<sup>18</sup> in terms of the possible destruction of social capital and mutual trust, has been used against the Welfare State (Putnam, 2000; Fukuyama, 1995, Coleman, 1990), without any empirical evidence. The evidence from empirical studies has, instead, indicated that the Welfare State has not had a negative impact on social capital (Van Oorschot and Arts, 2005). In their article “The Social Capital of European Welfare States: The Crowding Out Hypothesis Revisited”, Van Oorschot and Arts showed that the only crowding out effect of a strong Welfare State on social capital<sup>19</sup> appears in ‘trustworthiness’,



defined as a commitment to a common morality and social norms. Social networks (friends, family and political engagement) and social trust (measured as interpersonal trust and trust in institutions), are not influenced by large Welfare State expenditures and provisions. So, it seems that this argument is more ideological than factual.

In this regard, Skocpol's argumentation (1996) is pertinent for our discussion because she offers many reasons to challenge the statement that the Welfare State and public policy action in general, reduce social capital. For her, the argument of the community renewal role in increasing social capital hides a strong 'ideological' argument: the proposal to substitute the Welfare State with an 'opportunity society' (Skocpol, 1996). Neo-classicists and communitarians, even if for different reasons, agree on the idea that the state should not play an active role in society. It can just provoke damage to communitarian values essential to keep social capital in our society and it has to roll back without interfering in the free market and communitarian life.

Skocpol offered a strong historical counter-argument to these hypotheses. Their restricted vision of the role of public power in the creation of social capital does not take into account public support and partnership that the United States government has encouraged since the beginning of its history. In fact the government has worked closely with associations furnishing support and infrastructure: "Conservatives may imagine that popular voluntary associations and the Welfare State are contradictory opposites, but historically they have operated in close symbiosis" (Skocpol, 1996:22). Voluntary civic associations, in fact, have participated jointly with the government to create and administer welfare programs for many decades.

Communitarians see the state as the main enemy and they often ignore the danger coming from a free market economy for traditional communities. The market can also destroy strong ties and relationships of reciprocity. It is evident from Skocpol's analysis that those propositions against the state are derived only from strong 'ideological bias' and an inaccurate analysis of reality.

The historical argument proposed by Skocpol seems valuable also in Europe. In fact social capital, as measured in Van Oorschot's previously mentioned study, is bigger in Nordic countries than in Mediterranean ones (Van Oorschot, 2005). If Putnam's analysis,

which directly derives from Tocqueville, was true, we should clearly find far less social capital in Sweden than in Greece for example, and yet this is not the case.

Skocpol goes back to Marxist theory to demonstrate that the government cannot be considered as a simple superstructure and nor can community be considered the primary institutional structure in the organization of a country: “Just as Marxists are wrong to assume that the economy is the primary “substructure” while government and politics are merely “superstructure”, so Tocqueville romanticists are wrong to assume that spontaneous social association is primary while government and politics are derivatives” (Skocpol, 1996: 23). In opposition to this vision, civic associations in the United States were stimulated during the American Revolution, Civil War, the New Deal, World War I and II by the State. On the other hand, associations supported the federal structure to deliver services tailored to the needs of local populations. Civic associations and government work better when there is a synergy and a mutual respect for the respective roles. In this sense they are complementary. So, Skocpol argues that to revitalize American civil society, vibrant associative networks are not enough, there is a need for a strong political reorganization of democratic systems. Only after this process can ‘civic engagement’ flourish and help the development of the nation.

The assumption presented in *Bowling Alone* (Putnam, 2000) that local voluntarism is the only primary factor of a healthy democracy is a normative one that has never been clearly demonstrated, as shown by Skocpol. This ‘normative’ assumption is supported by a mix of data, historical and sociological explanations that do not clearly connect. From this point of view Putnam’s vision is very dangerous, because with his work he has been able to shift the debate toward an individual perspective, avoiding the problem of discussing the structural causes that generate social trust in society.

SHIFTING ATTENTION FROM REAL PROBLEMS TO FIND NEW WAYS TO  
‘RENEW SOCIETY’

Following the criticisms of incoherence, of reshaping an old concept with a new appealing term and the low consideration for state intervention in generating social capital and associative networks, it is time to highlight the most important limit of Putnam’s

analysis: the use of the concept of social capital to shift attention from the structural causes of desegregation in modern society.

Putnam and other authors (such as Fukuyama) give more importance to cultural values rather than economic factors to describe disaggregation. In particular, he considered income inequalities only marginally in *Making Democracy Work*, and then this argument<sup>20</sup> does not reappear in *Bowling Alone*.

The American sociologist doesn't want to address such a structural issue in his theory. His aim is to furnish a demonstration of how "civic engagement" can renew a society. But we could argue that the decline of social capital in the United States (if this decline is demonstrable) is dependent upon the increase of inequalities. The American Gini coefficient is in fact the highest in western world.<sup>21</sup>

This critique of Putnam is well discussed in an interesting article by O'Connel, called "Anti Social Capital. Civic Values Versus Economic Equality in the EU" (O'Connel, 2003). The redistribution of economic wealth is a complicated issue and perhaps it seems easier to avoid the problem, trying instead to demonstrate that alienation and disaggregation can be reduced simply by building more cohesive societies:

Rather, an active interest in their local football club will suffice to turn 'ghetto mums' into 'soccer mums'. Vibrant bird-watching associations, busy rotary clubs, and regular philatelic conventions will start the wheels of progress rolling. This is not a caricature of the position; in *Bowling Alone*, these are precisely the sorts of measures set forth for renewing the stock of social capital (O'Connel; 2003: 247).

O'Connel with his position gives us a new key to read Putnam's works and all the attention that politics and mass media have paid to social capital. It is much easier to demand more participation in associations rather than working on the structural causes of social disaggregation.

The real problem is not 'civic participation', but inequalities. In fact, income equality seems to be more correlated to economic and social development than social capital (O'Connel; 2003) and what is more, economic equality explains the evolution of dependent variables such as transparency of institutions, R&D spending and social satisfaction more than social capital. For this reason it is problematic (in addition to all the reasons highlighted in the previous

sections) and also incorrect (in the light of quantitative evidence) to consider social capital as an elixir to improve every crucial aspect of society. In what follows, we explore income inequalities in Italian regions to discuss this crucial aspect.

#### SOCIAL CAPITAL AND INCOME INEQUALITIES IN ITALIAN REGIONS

To understand the different performances of democratic institutions Putnam (1993) undertook the famous study of Italian regions. He argues that the main cause of the divergent institutional performances between the South and the North is the presence of a different degree of civic engagement. The degree of civic engagement is measured through the endowment of social capital of every region.

Firstly, the study considers institutions as an independent variable to explore how institutional change affects the identities, power and strategy of political actors. Secondly, institutions are considered as a dependent variable to analyse how their performance has been conditioned by history (Putnam, 1993:9). In order to study institutional performance the measurement was assessed with four tests, ‘comprehensiveness’, ‘internal consistence’ (looking at performance in single dimensions), ‘reliability’, ‘correspondence to the objectives and evaluations presented in the study’ (Putnam, 1993: 64). Putnam proposed a compound indicator (respondent to these four principles) to measure institutional performance.<sup>22</sup>

Socio-economic modernity and civic community development are the two main factors that explain institutional performance divergence. Nevertheless, according to Putnam, too much emphasis has been posed on the classical argument of wealth and socio-economic development. The huge difference between the North and the South of Italy cannot be explained only by this factor. It is necessary to go back to Machiavelli’s concept of civic virtue to give a comprehensive explanation.

Putnam revitalizes the importance of civic virtue using the concept of ‘civicness’ that he measured through social capital (he proposed an indicator based on outcomes).<sup>23</sup> In his model he attempted to demonstrate that civicness is more correlated to institutional performance than socio-economic development, therefore, social capital is more important than socio-economic factors to predict the success of institutions. But wealth (measured

through the GDP) is not the only socio-economic factor that should be taken into account.

Discussing social capital implies the analyses of social cohesiveness and participation in society. The GDP per capita, at this regard is not the only socio-economic variable to play a role. We tend to create links with others mainly when we meet someone with a similar social-status (Bourdieu, 1980). So we may argue that egalitarian societies foster cohesiveness and participation, therefore creation of social capital. It is interesting to notice that Italian regions with higher and more rapidly increasing Gini coefficients are the ones that Putnam identified as less civic (Table 1).

Calabria, Campania, Sicily, Puglia, Molise, Abruzzo and Sardegna have the lowest value for Putnam's measures of civic community and also for our regional Gini coefficient<sup>24</sup> (1993). Southern regions are already characterized by a slower socio-economic development and by a diffused incapacity of the inhabitants to act collectively. The increase of the Gini coefficient in 18 regions out of 20, in the last two decades must have warned policy makers. In reality this issue has been completely absent from political debate. In this regard, overemphasis attributed to cultural values (justified and supported by social capital debate) to explain the poor institutional performance of Southern regions hides the danger of underestimating the impact of increasing inequalities on the efficiency of institutions and the generation of trust in the society.

Tab. 1 - Gini Coefficient Italian regions (1989-2000)

Region	Gini Coefficient 1989	Gini Coefficient 2000	Variation 1989-2000 %
Piemonte	0.30	0.29	-4.48
Val D'aosta	nd	nd	nd
Lombardia	0.28	0.30	8.51
Liguria	0.27	0.30	11.96
Trentino	0.27	0.27	1.77
Veneto	0.26	0.31	18.00
Friuli	0.25	0.30	18.01
Emilia Romagna	0.26	0.29	10.70
Toscana	0.25	0.27	10.45
Umbria	0.24	0.24	-0.44
Marche	0.24	0.30	21.66
Lazio	0.29	0.28	-3.53
Abruzzo	0.27	0.38	42.37
Molise	0.26	0.36	37.72
Campania	0.30	0.34	13.91
Puglia	0.29	0.33	15.48
Basilicata	0.22	0.27	20.99
Calabria	0.23	0.32	34.63
Sicilia	0.31	0.38	23.42
Sardegna	0.30	0.33	9.83

Source: Own calculations from LIS (Luxembourg Income Study).

## CONCLUSION

The paper critically discusses the historical and political importance of the Social Capital concept, placing a particular emphasis on a critical re-evaluation of Putnam's idea, in order to underline the importance of the relation between social capital and equality. In order to achieve this objective, four criticisms have been spelled out.

The first, proposed by Lemann (1996) regards the presence of incoherence between the historical arguments presented in *Making Democracy Work*, to justify the difference between the South and the North of Italy, and *Bowling Alone* where the historical dimension is not taken into account. The second proposed by Thomson (2005) regards the use of social capital theory to return to an old debate: society versus community. In this sense Putnam's use of the social capital

concept has the function of shifting attention from structural problems of society like 'alienation' to individual responsibility. The responsibility for social inclusion is no longer explained by a lack of engagement of public powers but it is exclusively owned by individuals.

The third criticism formulated by Skocpol (1996) is strictly connected to the second. It regards the importance of public powers in the generation of trust and reciprocity. According to Skocpol, American civic engagement has been historically supported by the State. Without the partnership of the State, American democracy and civic engagement would never have flourished. The fourth criticism takes into account the previous ones, expanding on the importance of equality in the generation of social capital. The success of social capital theory has contributed to shifting the debate from the collective nature of socio-economic problems to the conviction that individual engagement can be the elixir to renew society. In this regard, in order to rediscover the importance and the limits of social capital concept, there is a need to go back to the original Tocqueville's conception.

Starting from the assumption that the generation of social capital is important to improve the socio-economic condition of a country, it is argued that there is a strong correlation between the generation of social capital and income equality. Putnam attributed the lack of social capital in Southern regions mainly to cultural and historical variables. In the article it is shown, through the measurement of the Gini coefficient, how regions with highest coefficients tend to have the lowest levels of social capital. From this consideration, new research can be undertaken, with the aim of generalizing the first conclusions discussed for the Italian case. Europe is a unique case to verify this hypothesis at a regional level. Countries like Belgium, Italy, United Kingdom, Germany and Spain contain regions with peculiar histories and different levels of reciprocity and trust.

Testing the relationship between inequalities and social capital in this context would allow us to verify empirically Tocqueville's original hypothesis. Putnam recalls the romantic myth, that a society exceptionally involved in local social life is able to guarantee the best level of social performance. But the American scholar 'surprisingly' forgot, in his famous analysis, the main argument that Tocqueville

used to explain the difference between American and European populations in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For Tocqueville, in fact, the most important difference was not the associationism or the form of government, but the equality of conditions: “Parmi les objets nouveaux qui, pendant mon séjour aux Etats-Unis, ont attiré mon attention, aucun n’a plus vivement frappé mes regards que l’égalité des conditions” (Tocqueville; 1960:8). The French social scientist was already aware of the importance of equality of conditions in building a cohesive society.

#### NOTES

- [1] The article refers to social capital in social theory and economic development. The concept has been fruitfully used in other contexts: 1.Families and youth behaviour problems, 2. Schooling and education, 3. Community life, 4.Work and organization, 5.Democracy and governance; 6.General cases of collective problems. For a detailed literature review see Woolcock (2000, note 20 page 195).
- [2] The reference is clearly to Tönnies, Durkheim, Tocqueville and Weber.
- [3] Such as ‘alienation’ with ‘trust’..
- [4] In particular, family and traditional communities.
- [5] He considered kinship, neighbourhood and friendship as part of the ‘Gemeinschaft’ which constitute the ‘pillars’ of a particular dimension of social capital, commonly labelled in the literature ‘social networks’.
- [6] She described the importance of social capital to improve the quality of life of a rural community.
- [7] Putnam took from Banfield the idea to measure newspaper readership, density of associative networks and electoral vote.
- [8] Thomson’s arguments is discussed in the section ‘A Romantic Come Back to Communitarianism’.
- [9] He detected four main factors (giving a detailed breakdown) of decline in the United States: the rise of female participation in the work market, which reduced the time available to participate in associations; the increase of mobility, stability of residence is directly correlated with a stronger civic engagement; changes in family structure (more divorces); the technological transformation of leisure, for example the revolution created by television. The symbol of this crisis is the phenomenon of “Solo Bowling” more people bowl without participating in leagues or without joining associations. According to Putnam the increase of tertiary groups (which present a less cohesive structure) and non-profit associations in environmental fields are not important enough in terms



of social connectedness to counterbalance the decline of classical forms of associations, the ones that produce more social capital. In other words, modernization of society is bringing a reduction of social capital.

- [10] Putnam refers to United States.
- [11] O'Connell's point of view is discussed in the section 'Shifting Attention Form Real Problems to Find New Ways to Renew Society'..
- [12] This is the reason why it has been so appreciated at political level.
- [13] The causes of decline highlighted by Putnam have been exposed in note 9.
- [14] As analysed in the next section.
- [15] Original version: "Une société composée d'une poussière infinie d'individus inorganisés, qu'un Etat hypertrophié s'efforce d'enserrer et de retenir, constitue une véritable monstruosité sociologique [...] Une nation ne peut se maintenir que si, entre l'Etat et le particulier, s'intercale toute une série de groupes secondaires qui soient assez proches des individus pour les attirer fortement dans leur sphère d'action et les entraîner ainsi dans le torrent général de la vie sociale".
- [16] "Les plus proches seuls intéressent. Chaque classe venant à se rapprocher des autres et à s'y mêler, ses membres deviennent indifférents et comme étrangers entre eux" (Tocqueville; 1960: 97).
- [17] We have also to appreciate that the post-revolutionary French context was far less democratic than the American one studied by Tocqueville at the beginning of the 19th century.
- [18] And against a strong government.
- [19] In his article Van Oorschot defines social capital as the sum of three elements, trustworthiness, social trust and social networks.
- [20] "The effectiveness of regional government is closely tied to the degree to which authority and social interchange in the life of the region is organized horizontally or hierarchically. Equality is an essential feature of the civic community" (Putnam, 1993: 105).
- [21] At this regard see Weinberg (1996:1).
- [22] Twelve indicators, divided into 'policy pronouncements' and 'policy implementation', are used in order to measure institutional performance:  
- For policy pronouncements: cabinet stability (number of cabinets in 10 years); budget promptness (average level of delay to complete action of their annual budgets); breadth of their statistical and informational facilities; reform legislation (in different areas: economic development, territorial and environmental planning and social services; looking at comprehensiveness, coherence and creativeness); legislative innovation.  
For policy implementations: day care centers (number of centers for number of children); family clinics; industrial policy instruments (plan implementations, looking at: regional economic development; regional land use; industrial plan; regional development finance agencies; industrial development and marketing consortia; job-training programs); agricultural spending capacity; local health unit expenditures; housing and urban development; bureaucratic responsiveness.
- [23] The indicator is made up of four items: number of associations, newspaper readership, electoral turnout, the incidence of preference

vote. In the following years social capital has been measured mainly through survey data rather than outcomes.

- [24] Gini coefficient is calculated according to Mahler's article 'Exploring the Subnational Dimension of Income Inequality: An Analysis of the Relationship Between Inequality and Electoral Turnout in the Developed Countries' (2002). Mahler described in detail what this definition of income includes: "More specifically, this definition includes such private sources of income as wages and salaries; income from self-employment; interest, rents, and property income received on a regular basis; occupational pensions; regular inter-household cash transfers; and court-ordered payments such as alimony and child support. Also included is income from public benefit programs, including sick pay; disability pay; retirement benefits; child or family allowances; unemployment compensation; maternity pay; military, veterans', or war benefits; and means-tested public assistance" (Mahler, 2002:119).

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