

## Social capital - multiple dimensions of one concept

*Social Capital, Social Identities - From Ownership to Belonging*, Dieter Thoma, Christoph Henning, Hans Bernhard Schmid (eds.), de Gruyter, Berlin/Boston, 2014

Marko B. Tmušić<sup>1</sup>

The term social capital is increasingly gaining in importance. Its multidimensionality affects to deal with it not only theoreticians from the opus of economic sciences, as expected, but also scholars from the field of sociology, philosophy, political sciences and religious studies. Book „*Social capital, social identities – from ownership to belonging*“ points to this crucial feature of social capital as a significant phenomenon of modern social science.

As a collection of papers, this book actually starts from the question what is social capital? What is its role in contemporary society? Pierre Bourdieu finds social capital as a network of relationships and products of investment strategies, individual or collective, consciously or unconsciously aimed at establishing or reproducing social relationships that are directly usable in the short or long term, implying durable obligations subjectively felt (respect, feeling of gratitude, etc.) or institutionally guaranteed (rights) (Bourdieu, 1986). James S. Coleman use the concept of social capital as a part of generally theoretical strategy and he is taking rational action as starting point but rejecting the extreme individual premises that often accompany it (Coleman, 1988). Robert D. Putnam by “social capital” means features of social life – networks, norms, and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively (Putnam, 1995). In contemporary political or economic sciences, reference is most generally made to the works of Putnam when dealing with the notion of social capital. It is precisely on these issues leads the biggest polemic in this book, starting from different theoretical viewpoints.

Made up of three key components, social networks, moral obligations, norms, and also social values, social capital is looked upon as a central condition of social integration and cohesion, economic success and the well-being of nations (p. 85.). All three of these components can be seen as parts of a larger whole, and that is a social strategy, permeated with the rules of behavior followed by the members of the community. For a rule of behavior to be a social norm, it must be in the interest of everyone to act in accordance with the rule if all others were to act in accordance with it. Social norm are (Nash) equilibrium rules of behavior (p. 48.). Because of this, economic success of developed countries and high level of political integration among their population, is a result of a high degree of accumulated social capital. The quality and the structure, but also societal consequences of those components

<sup>1</sup> Assistant, University of Belgrade, Faculty of Political Sciences, marko.tmusic@fpn.bg.ac.rs.

(norms, networks, and rules, especially informal social relations) have increasingly attracted the notice of sociologically, politically, and economically oriented scholars, culminating in the development of the concept of “social capital”.

Dieter Thoma linked the concept of social capital for the concept of belonging, and identity: “I can make something belong to me by an act of appropriation, or I can belong to something (membership or association).” He points out the two dimensions of social capital: a) a person is a part of (or belong to) a network; b) social capital is a resource that is at the disposal of a person (or figures among her belongings) (p. 16.). He describes the metabolism of social capital as well as taking the initiative, as active participation in social processes and as the development process in terms of connecting with others. It is about building relationships and acceptance of own position in the light of these new experiences.

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Starting from the assumption of most authors (Mike Savage, Martin Endress, etc.) that social capital is an important for understanding the meaning of contemporary inequality, especially its cultural and symbolic aspects, Martin Endress conclude that while forms of belonging as well as types of social capital are highly rooted in constellations of social inequality and therefore structurally ambivalent, the societal problem with which we are confronted is not the fact that there are boundaries and forms of exclusion in general. The problem, more specifically, that has to be analyzed is the historical and power-based specificity of forms of exclusion and disqualification in contemporary societies (p. 37.). Every discussion about social capital and belonging is political.

It is interesting to mention the view of Hans Bernard Schmid, who says that “...in terms closer to social science, social capital leads to a form of self-alienation in which the means by which people can achieve their goals somehow turn against them so that the goals they jointly pursue do not reflect their aims. Social capital corrupts our agency in such a way that what we are doing is not what we want to achieve.” (p. 62.). Because of that, he conclude that social capital can be intrinsically dangerous thing: it is a means for

the pursuit of our goals which may easily turn against us and direct our actions from our values, but conditions under which membership don't alienate the participants from their own goals are conditions under which individuals can at the same time satisfy their need for companionship and unity, and their need to be able to make sense of what they are doing collectively in terms of their own individual perspective. He points out that this is one of the core normative ideals of democracy – making sure that the goals pursued as a society are rooted in the whole of the lives of the participating individuals (p. 61 – 68.). Following up on Schmid, Henning stressed that it is not very clear why social capital should be considered as a good thing and why is it so attractive in the first place? Social capital may also have its bad effects. But, its good effects are the main reason for its attractiveness. At the state/macro level among good effects we can find social cohesion, stability, democracy, and perhaps growth, as a consequence of their efficiency. At the civic/meso level we can mention participation, and on the family/micro level there are good health, better education, good jobs, happiness, in short: fulfilling lives. All of these are good ends, and what serves these ends the best is good as a means (pp. 112 – 118.). He points out that it is good because of its desired effects, not because we call it “social capital”.

So we can on the basis of a short insight into the most significant conclusions of mentioned authors point out that the concept of social capital sublimates a series of political, economical, sociological, and philosophical assumptions, which must be taken together into account if we want to have one overall approach of the analysis of social capital in contemporary society. Book „*Social capital, social identities – from ownership to belonging*“ provides us with a handful of initial assumptions from the corpus of those disciplines, which is an excellent starting point for any future research in this area. This book opens many questions and dilemmas concerning of this highly current topic and thus further inflame the imagination of the scientific research. Thus provides excellent opportunities for future researchers to find their own direction of scientific arguments.