

## **Investigating Social Capital: Comparative Perspectives on Civil Society, Participation and Governance**

**Edited by Sanjeev Prakash and Per Selle**

**Sage Publications, 2004.**

Editors Sanjeev Prakash and Per Selle open their volume with the admission that a cross-national investigation of social capital in India, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Italy requires an explanation. Unfortunately, they fail to provide an adequate one. While *Investigating Social Capital* presents some insightful critiques and interesting empirical examinations, it does not offer a coherent set of arguments or basis for comparative analysis and, therefore, contributes only minimally as a comparative study of social capital. Suzanne Rudolph's chapter accomplishes the volume's stated objectives by demonstrating the conceptual value of testing the North-centric claims of social capital theory in the South. But the other chapters do not continue this comparative line of inquiry, leaving the reader to ponder the utility of the book's cross-national framework.

The volume is the product of the "Investigating Social Capital" workshop held in Solstrand, Norway in May 2000, organized as a part of the Social Capital and Collective Action project of the University of Bergen. The volume investigates the widespread claim that social capital, commonly measured in terms of associational participation, can explain differential achievements of countries' civil society, democratic governance, and economic development outcomes. Recognizing that social capital means many different things to different people, chapters in the volume seek to refine the definitions of social capital and identify the mechanisms by which national measures of democracy and development can be achieved through individuals' membership in voluntary associations.

Like many conference volumes, *Investigating Social Capital* does not comprise a strong coherent whole, but offers

several insightful critical threads that weave throughout the work. The introductory chapter by Prakash and Selle effectively identifies these threads, but because they are not explicitly discussed throughout the chapters and there is no conclusion to tie them all together, these threads remain loose thematic strands. The threads are all critical assessments, either theoretically- or empirically-grounded, of the central tenets of social capital theory, as articulated by Robert Putnam in *Making Democracy Work* (1993) and *Bowling Alone* (2000) and pervading much of the contemporary political science and international development literatures. The volume discusses four main tenets, as follows: 1) a strong civil society is a basis of effective democratic governance irrespective of the forms of civic engagement present in different social contexts (*Rudolph*); 2) trust in certain arenas can be generalized to trust in other arenas (*Rothstein, Stolle, Diani, Caulkins, Krishna, Torsvik*); 3) the social capital of a society can be measured by aggregating rates of individual association membership, personal relationships, and norms (*Dekker, Rothstein*); and 4) membership in passive forms of voluntary associations – like internet communities and "checkbox activism" – is less likely to produce the trust necessary for desirable political and economic outcomes (*Hadenius, Wolleæk/Selle, Tranvik*). Broadly speaking, the conclusion of each of these chapters is that the explanatory power of social capital theory is weakened by the absence of context-specific examinations and explicit intervening mechanisms. While the authors all appear to recognize the usefulness of social capital for explaining particular, context-specific outcomes, they each assert, or illustrate empirically, that the concept's utility in explaining particular outcomes does not necessarily mean that it will effectively explain other outcomes.

The contributions to South Asian scholarship are thin. Two of the twelve essays discuss social capital in India, while eight focus on Northern and Western Europe, and four are not grounded in a particular socio-spatial context. The two chapters that draw upon South Asian research are quite different in scope. Anirudh Krishna reports the findings of an empirical study of development

programs in 60 Rajasthani villages, while Suzanne Rudolph's chapter, which was originally presented as a lecture to mark the Golden Jubilee of Sri Lanka's independence, theorizes civil society in the Global South. Rudolph claims that some associational forms, particularly those present in India, can actually undermine democratic aims while still constituting civil society. By excluding hereditary associational forms from social capital definitions, and not distinguishing between political/non-political, deliberative/interest-oriented, and hierarchical/egalitarian voluntary associations, most social capital theorists, including Putnam, fail to address the associational specificity necessary if the concepts of social capital and civil society are to be useful for understanding democratic governance in South Asia. Meanwhile, Krishna examines how well locally-defined measures of social capital (such as membership in labor-sharing groups, dealing with natural disasters, and reciprocity) explain the outcome of development programs in villages in four regions in Rajasthan. He finds that high

levels of social capital are necessary, but not sufficient for explaining the success of development programs. While acknowledging that it is difficult to build social capital in the short term, he concludes that policies should focus on enhancing social capital through educational institutions. While questions of civic engagement in local politics in India currently comprise a rich area of research, Rudolph's and Krishna's chapters make useful, but limited, contributions to this field.

Each of the chapters assumes a basic understanding of social capital theory. The volume is, therefore, not an effective primer for those unfamiliar with the concept. While the introduction and several of the chapters, most notably Rudolph, Dekker, and Diani, present a brief conceptual lineage of social capital theory, the book is more critical than summative. The volume will, therefore, be of greatest interest to those interested in the internal debates in the field and would be a useful supplementary, but not primary, text for a graduate-level course on civic engagement or participatory democracy.

**Liza Weinstein****University of Chicago**