



Studies of Social Capital, Projection of Doctrines, and Sociological References

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Summary

Almost all studies on social capital are characterized by the absence of incorporation of the fundamentals of social sciences in the strict sense. In addition, it is based on certain doctrines, especially those linked to the so-called political “pluralism”. Among the main effects of this detachment from the theoretical and epistemological bases of the social sciences, the inexistence of the formulation and use of assumptions based on rationalism and, therefore, that which refer to universality stands out. In more immediate terms, this results in the strong redundancy character of this type of study.

An introductory item exposes some general problems and limits in the relationship between this type of study and the social sciences. Next, the question of the multidimensionality of social structures and the position of these studies concerning this problem are discussed. The following item discusses the relationships with the reevaluation of social integration in its specific perspective. Finally, the final item addresses some problems arising from the limitations of the theoretical foundations of these studies, particularly concerning the agent's emergency conditions.

Introduction

In more general terms, is on the agenda the problem of sociology's relations with the rationalist perspective and, on the other hand, with the “practical” uses of knowledge. Although this type of relationship can be conceived as a continuity between two poles, they are based on different logics of action. At this point, Weber's analogy (1983, 221) between rationalist knowledge and practical application, taking clinical medicine as an exemplary case constitutes an important reference. This includes the problem of the uses of “practical” classification schemes (Bourdieu, 1982, 1980), which can be taken as empirical evidence but not as explanatory principles.

Thus, on a more general level, the problem of the presuppositions of explanatory principles and their relations with rationalism or with other schemes of interpretation and beliefs or theodicies (Weber, 1984, 454–475) comes into play. Hammersley (2014) takes the fact that for the social sciences, there is no object before its formulation as a problem of knowledge as one of the basic limits to its existence. However, the social sciences are not based on what established and formalized disciplines are taken as a paradigm. Consequently, what can be defined as a theoretical position does not necessarily equate to something consensual and with defined foundations. These conditions maintain direct relations with a series of general problems of the social sciences and their theoretical and epistemological foundations. One of the general questions, compared to the natural sciences, is that of the universality of the assumptions that underlie the theoretical and epistemological bases.

This has direct implications concerning the social sciences as a whole, given the difficulties in establishing rationalist assumptions without amalgamation, with ontological or meaning problems. It is not just the distinction between analytical knowledge and “practical” application, as indicated even in Weber's analogy (1983, 221) with clinical medicine. The separation of social sciences from the conceptions of human nature and society becomes much more difficult and precarious. This makes it possible to convert assumptions that underlie conceptions of human nature and society into epistemological principles and, therefore, the incorporation of something that is not universal because it is associated with the search for meaning and adherence to doctrinal principles.

The idea that the emergence of modern social sciences occurred in opposition to religious or supernatural beliefs is widespread. It so happens that, with the emergence of new philosophies, many other doctrines that support moral values or primordial adherence to a certain conception of society occupy this position of “rationalization” (in the Weberian sense) and foundation for interpretation schemes, which may include the social sciences.

Thus, more than the divisions between theoretical and epistemological currents in the confrontation in the social sciences and sociology, one of the main differences occurs in the relations between theoretical and epistemological foundations with rationalism and epistemological scepticism. It is in this sense that the distinction between theoretical and epistemological positions with a character of doctrines and those strictly sociological seems important.

At a more general level, the opposition between theoretical and epistemological positions presupposes that social structures and actions are based on action and legitimation resources and, therefore, hierarchization and domination (Weber, 1984, 43, 699). On the other hand, there are the theoretical and epistemological positions that presuppose the possibility of the absence of this domination, defined as “emancipation” or something similar. Positions based on assumptions of domination are not restricted to any specific current but encompass a set of perspectives more directly associated with professional practice and conceptions of sociology as an academic discipline. In terms of professional practice, one of the main effects of this opposition is the clashes between those who take the logic of action and the principles of legitimation as objects of study and, on the other hand, the apprehension of these principles of legitimation as presuppositions. Among so many exemplary cases that could be indicated in this regard, one of the most obvious is the transformation of political activities and their legitimization into explanatory principles specific to the sciences (Hammersley, 2014, 1992)

Therefore, in addition to the oppositions relating to the epistemological foundations of the social sciences, the relationships with the different types of beliefs and moral values are decisive. In this case too, on a more general level, relationships with explicitly religious beliefs or with some revealed truth stand out. This type of belief of a more mystical nature is the object of criticism in the defence of rationalist positions. It happens that beliefs may have other foundations, which legitimize adherence to a certain conception of society and its legitimation principles, without necessarily referring to something explicitly supernatural or mystical. These are the principles that underlie the beliefs that ground the legitimation of a given social structure and, like any value, imply pretensions to universality. The main topic on the agenda is the case of the conceptions of society, which simultaneously constitute schemes of “explanation” and prescription of its necessity and legitimacy.

On the other hand, this type of study on social capital is linked to different interests and logics of action, resulting from the confluence of a series of conditions. Among these constraints, the growth in the use of social sciences for “practical” purposes and the increasing distance from its appreciation in academic terms seem evident. In addition, there is also a confluence of the valuation of the doctrines that underlie the current definitions of social capital as a result of the new conditions of ideological confrontations and engagement modalities.

This case of studies related to social capital can point in the direction of broader general trends, which cover the whole of the social sciences. These are new trends in the relationship between professional practice and the conceptions of social sciences and their uses for “practical” purposes. However, if previously the conceptions and uses for “practical” purposes were more directly centred in the poles and more directly linked to the periphery, or then, to organizations directed to social intervention, there are strong indications in the sense of trends of the predominance of strictly “practical” conceptions in poles considered central.

The relations of studies on social capital with the theoretical and epistemological foundations of the social sciences have direct implications in the formulation of the object of study. This is also because the appropriations of conceptual definitions of social capital tend to adopt a perspective of substantialist eclecticism in which what differentiates the concepts consists of some attribute contained in them. Therefore, the question would be in the constitutive elements of this concept. It happens that what is on the agenda are clashes between conceptions of society, social sciences, or sociology and their *raison d'être*. This is the concept of social capital as an instrument to demonstrate something analytically relevant or, on the other hand, to be used as some “practical” or ontological objective. In one of the roots of the original conceptualizations of social capital, there is a position based on epistemological scepticism, which includes the Weberian perspective and that of Bourdieu, on the other hand, a set of definitions based on doctrines can be extremely relevant. However, in this case, the main argumentative effectiveness is based on the historical success of the doctrinal principles that serve as a foundation and their correlates, particularly the “pluralist” civic morality.

If, on the one hand, the intense discussions regarding the definitions of social capital are limited to the attributes that would compose it, on the other hand, it is evident that the main issue, at least from a sociological perspective, consists of

the relations between these definition criteria and the underlying general principles. Concerning discussions relating to the conceptual definitions of social capital and its eventual relations with sociology as an academic discipline, the first necessary distinction is between principles of definition and formulation of objects of study based on rationalism and those based on moral values. In other words, what Weber (1984, 454–475) defines as theodicy is on the agenda, which underlies the rationalization and search for the meaning of a given conception of society and the respective positions and values involved.

This implies another axis of problems and one that is associated with the high degree of redundancy and ethnocentrism of works related to social capital. It is about the lack of more precise definitions of the problems related to the formation of the agent and its relations with the meaning and logic of action. As in general conceptual definitions based on a certain doctrine or civic morals are on the agenda, the problem of agent formation tends to be limited to the degree of approximation with the “good” social capital and what would be an analytical problem is reduced to its prescriptive aspects.

This is related to the current conception of social sciences. However, this cannot be exclusively attributed to the theoretical orientations of definitions of social capital linked to doctrines or current civic morals. The conceptions of social sciences, or more specifically, of sociology, as a means of instrumentalizing “causes” (Coradini, 2018) or legitimizing “practical” problems go much further. The problem of formulating the object of study, for practically all of the works on social capital examined, does not appear in the sense of sociology as an academic discipline, for which the formulation of the object of study relates to the theoretical bases and epistemological and conceptual definitions concerning a certain problem of knowledge. For these works aimed at the study of social capital, the “object” is already inscribed in the assumptions that support the conceptual definitions of social capital. As the existence and effectiveness of social capital are assumptions, all research works consist of measuring the degree of effectiveness.

One of the more general consequences of this “virtuous circuit” is a kind of closure or “club effect” of this type of study. One of the pieces of evidence of this is the demonstrations of self-evident effects attributed to social capital as if something extraordinary was on the agenda. In more general terms, this tendency manifests itself in the permanent indirect references to what can be attributed to the effects of social integration, without any regard to the fact that this, in other perspectives, has been one of the main themes of sociology since its beginnings.

The appropriations of the original conceptual definitions can have different versions depending on the respective positions in these studies, such as that with an emphasis on “neo-capitalism” (Lin, 2001), civic morality (Putnam, Leonardi, & Nanetti, 1993), rational choice (Coleman, 1975), among others. Therefore, at least concerning its relations with sociology, this character of studies focused on “practical issues” and denial of academic discipline, encompasses different specificities. With very few exceptions, there are almost no works that can be considered sociology in the strict sense and the reasons are diverse. Although these are works centred on “practical” problems for which the social sciences only come in as a possible instrument of measurement and instrumentalization of intervention in “causes” and not as a basis for formulating the object of study, the different segments encompass several “companies,” interests, and logics of action. Therefore, it is a phenomenon that results from the confluence of different multifaceted interests and school subjects. This is the case of the uses of social capital definitions for the instrumentalization of intervention policies of large international organizations, such as the World Bank. Differently, but in an articulated and interdependent way, it is the case of bureaucratic or political organizations or school organizations focused on activities of interest representation, advocacy, or policies based on the dissemination of certain values or doctrines.

More than a kind of effort, in the sense of the simultaneous use of different theoretical perspectives or else, of some posture in defence of multidisciplinary, which is very common in approaches turned to “practical problems,” this conception of social sciences has given the instrumentalization of “solutions” to “practical” problems which indicates in the sense of something with new characteristics. From the set of vast bibliography on the subject of social capital, a very rare case of exegesis and criticism with a broader perspective consists of the set of works by Fine (2010). However, what is most intriguing is that one of his definitions of works on social capital consists of a metaphor, that of “McDonaldization” (Fine, 2010, 12–35), which seems the most appropriate as a general synthesis. It has the merit of pointing out that it is something new and that it cannot be defined simply by some of its characteristics.

Multidimensionality and the meanings of “social”

Although in the bibliography related to this type of study, there are strong disputes over the origin of the expression “social capital,” this is more directly associated with the nominalist substantivism that tends to drive this type of discussion. Even without going into the intricacies of this discussion, it is worth highlighting a first perspective whose main roots lie in readings of the history of “communitarianism” in more general terms and particularly in the US. Among the authors in this perspective, Farr (2004, 2007) stands out as an apologist and Fine (2010) as a critic of the formulations and uses of the expression “social capital.” From this perspective, what is on the agenda is not just a set of historical

descriptions describing the emergence of the “concept,” but the celebration of a type of social structure whose dynamics based on this “social” would be responsible for the positive results observed historically.

Although with ideologically close roots, with a broader scope, a second strand of origins of definitions of social capital with different ramifications is more directly based on political philosophies and associated civic morals. It is particularly about the currents linked to what ended up constituting what is currently designated as “pluralism.” One of the most cited bibliographic sources consists of the writings of Tocqueville, although with a direct connection with the more liberal versions of contractualism, such as Locke's formulations (Newton, 2001) Among the formulators of more directly associated definitions, Putnam (Putnam, Leonardi, & Nanetti, 1993) stands out with ties also to rational choice and neoclassical economics (particularly Coleman, 1988). In a position also more associated directly with neoclassical economics and defending what is defined as “neo-capitalism” with an explicitly apologetic position, perspectives such as the so-called “theory of social resources” stand out (Lin, 2001 and Burt, 2001, among others).

However, sociology as an academic discipline, the strand of definitions of social capital that has the most direct influence is initiated in neoclassical economics, initially formulated by G. Becker and whose expansion to sociology has Coleman (1988) as its main author. In the original formulations, this importance stems from its association with a much more general problem than that of the mere conceptual definition of social capital. It deals with the problems of the relations between what is understood as the “social” with the multidimensionality of the social structures, in which the economy is integrated. It does not seem to be a mere coincidence that this formulation of the “social” as a kind of “capital” is elaborated by a version of economics more directly restricted to the rationality of the market, that is, the neoclassical perspective that, at the limit, presupposes the exclusion of other rationalities of the agent. In this sense, the addition of “social” as a kind of capital would add this dimension (which provokes criticism of other positions in the discipline of economics itself, as is the case of Fine, 2000, 25–39; 2010).

On the other hand, beyond the dynamics between theoretical positions in different disciplines of the social sciences, a hypothesis that emerges consists of the new conditions for the development of capitalism itself. The first of these new general conditions consists in moving from the phase more directly centred on relations and “command” logic of the “captain of industry” type to what can be synthesized by the more “managerial” phase and the myth of democratization (in the case of French, see Bourdieu, 1989, 148, 478 and for capitalism in the US, Wolf and Silverman, 2001, 14–15). From this perspective, the different periods of central capitalism are characterized by various general problems and responses, such as that of “triumphant capitalism,” and in the most recent period, “the dominant mode” of intellectual response was to explain and justify the entry of “new” and previously unrepresented groups. “The America of the present is marked by the extension into all spheres of public life of a set of civil and military bureaucracies, connected through contracts to private concerns. I shall argue that the dominant intellectual issue of the present is the nature of public power and its exercise, wise or unwise, responsible or irresponsible. Under these conditions, the “major protagonist of this faith in education as a means of liberating people from the outworn canons of the past was Dewey, who saw in the union of education and science the basis for a true association of equals, sustained through the freely given cooperation of the participants” (Wolf & Silverman, 2001, 18).

Concerning capitalism in peripheral conditions, this strengthening of valuation and investments in social capital is directly linked not only to large international organizations but also to those more general enterprises aimed at the export/import of cultural models and institutional ones originating in western centres. Together with this appreciation of cultural and institutional models, there is a strong association with new versions of the application of economics as a discipline focused on “development” and, consequently, of its uses in the instrumentalization of themes linked to “community” and “social.” This focuses on problems regarding the conditions for the possibility of “universalization” of Western cultural and institutional models in extra-Western social structures (as particularly highlighted by the work of Badie and Hermet, 1993; on the homology between the notion of social capital used by the Inter-American Development Bank and the so-called North American school of “political).

The theoretical perspectives that conceive social structures as the result of disputes between resources or hierarchical means of action and legitimation encompass the problem of multidimensionality. In its perspective, this problem is also at the origin of the concept of social capital for neoclassical economics, which conceives “capital,” both economic and “social,” among others, in positive terms, either for its effectiveness or in doctrinal and moral terms. However, for sociology as an academic discipline and particularly one based on Weber's perspective, as is the case of Bourdieu, it is about social structures as forms of resources or “capitals” and “domination” (Weber, 1984, 699; Bourdieu, 1989, 371–427, among others).

On the other hand, with regard specifically to social capital in its meaning, these theoretical perspectives conceive social structures as processes and results of the confrontation between different means of action, some of which may constitute forms of “capital” (Bourdieu, 1989, 375–385), a more general issue is on the agenda. These are theoretical and

methodological issues regarding the relationships between the more socially objectified, explicit, and codified dimensions and those of a more implicit and tacit nature (Bourdieu, 1980). In general, the most objectified dimensions are those institutionalized with abstract formal rules, unlike the most implicit ones, which tend to be based on rules with the foundation on principles and resources of reciprocity.

The expansion of works on social capital and the positivity of “social”

Although the autonomy and independence of the social sciences are not part of the agenda of concerns of this set of works, in some cases positions regarding the problem emerge. One of the most direct and explicit cases is represented by a publication (Kurt, 2007), significantly by a sociologist from a country that stands out for the autonomy of social sciences or university research in general (Osnabrück University, Germany). In this publication, the character of the “strictly external observation perspective” of sociology is negatively highlighted, as opposed to “jurisprudence or economics.” The publication aims to “see one possible answer in viewing sociology as a form of advisory sociology” (Kurt, 2007, 283). In turn, concerning one of the main references regarding the conceptual definition of social capital in this perspective, as president of the American Political Science Association (APSA) in 2002, Putnam defines his discipline as having a “public role” (Putnam, 2003). In more general terms, to consider a broader group of professionals linked to the social sciences, the seminar held by Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) in 2003 serves as an exemplary case (Arriagada & Miranda, 2003). The positions on the agenda are very indicative that it is basically about mediators with a background in social sciences. Therefore, whether social capital studies or the use of social sciences in general, they always have a sense of instrumentalizing mediation activities in different modalities, be it more directly militancy, mediation in public bureaucracies, activism in general or other forms, that is, as “state-civil society-market articulation” (Miranda, 2003, 167).

Along with this denial of sociology or the social sciences in general as academic disciplines, another general characteristic is the conception of the “social” as something positive to be morally valued. This “social” has the meaning that is generally attributed to social capital, but also encompasses more general aspects, such as social integration and the values that supposedly contribute to it. Among these values, there may also be those classified as negative, because there are those considered “bad” in the specifications of what is defined as social capital and its attributes (Portes, 2014).

This overvaluation of the “social” tends to lead to redundancy or to the realization of what can be classified as the “discovery of the obvious.” As it is a set of assumptions that make social integration morally positive, it ends up being a generalized search for what was found in the beginnings of sociology, that is, social integration can have positive effects on certain individuals able to reach. The difference is that in these early works or sociology in general, whether by Durkheim or other authors the problem at hand is another. It is about formulating schemes for interpreting and measuring “society” or the effects of social structure.

The repetitive search for the positive effects of social capital in the most diverse contexts makes these works, as well as the respective results, absolutely predictable. This stems from the set of assumptions and their doctrinal bases and the failure to face the problem of the agent's emergency conditions. Although some publications even mention something along these lines, the few cases in which this appears occur particularly in peripheral situations, either due to the less intensely integrated or converted conditions of the authors, or else, due to the precariousness of what is considered as capital social.

The historical success of the social structures which serve as the basis for the doctrines and values that underlie the assumptions supports their legitimacy, but also has the effect of providing evidence of the “truth” of the assumptions themselves. This replaces assumptions based on applied rationalism and sociological analysis. The most important consequence of this, in sociological terms, is the impossibility of refuting these results. This is not only due to the character of preaching to converts which this type of work has but to the confusion between doctrinal premises or civic morals and sociological analysis. Returning to the analogy with clinical medicine presented by Weber (1983, 221), it is evident that there can be practical efficacy in its application. However, the analytical problem based on rationalism does not lie within this logic of action.

However, in addition to problems of social science conception, the conceptions of society come into play. To mention an exemplary case of a publication on social capital dealing with problems related to individualism as a conception of society, see Goddard (2003, 59). As justification for the work on social capital, the assumption of the existence of “a broadly perpetrated fiction in Modern Society ... This fiction is that Society consists of a set of independent individuals, each of whom acts to achieve goals that are independently arrived at...” In summary, the very mythologies or individualist conception of society are attributed to the “modern society.” The general hypothesis is that “social capital is independent of socioeconomic status”

In peripheral conditions, however, one of the most used categories is not doctrinal but a description of conditions of existence. This is the category defined as “poverty”, which constitutes one of the basic objects of intervention. Faced with this type of situation, in which social capital does not have the prescribed effects, farther from what is considered “good” social capital, the ambivalences in the adoption of theoretical positions of the social sciences external to the definitions of social capital become more directly derived from the doctrines used (e.g. Rothstein & Stolle, 441).

This type of position that centres the origins of social capital in institutional structures is close to publications on definitions of social capital that take their origins in the “structures of relationships” that make up the concepts themselves, whereas another position defines social capital as something of an individual character. To take an exemplary case of the position that centres the origins or generation of social capital in “relationships,” Mouw (2006, 79) defines it as “it is not a characteristic or a personality trait but a resource that resides in the networks and groups to which people belong.” As for those who define social capital as an individual resource, there is a tendency to associate this resource with mediation positions in the market (Lin, Burt).

However, the most distant conditions from those in which the matrices of the doctrines that underlie the definitions of social capital in vogue are formulated can have their effects reinforced by including authors who are also less integrated into the main string of the doctrines. A good exemplary case of a study of the relations of a social category whose social position indicates less integration into the dominant culture, that is, “poor people” in extra-Western conditions, can be taken from a publication by Das (2004, 27). The general idea is that “much of the literature is too sanguine of the benefits of social capital for the poor. It is, of course, important to look at the extent to which social capital can help the poor. But how the conditions of the poor people can also affect their social capital is equally important to examine and has often been neglected by many scholars who have been busy proving that social capital is a new paradigm of development” (Das, 2004, 29).

This type of dialogue between the deaf reaches its apex when dealing with attempts at the simultaneous use of different theoretical positions. This is the case of attempts at the simultaneous use of definitions of social capital based on civic morality and Bourdieu's propositions. Much more than problems relating to conceptual definitions of social capital, these misunderstandings point to a more general problem in the social sciences or sociology. As this is a discipline that does not have established paradigms, theoretical discussions tend to be limited to conceptual definitions without considering the epistemological principles that underlie them. This results in appropriations that simply redefine the meanings of the conceptual definitions themselves, because they are appropriated based on other codes.

As an exemplary case in this sense, a publication by Callahan (2005) can be taken, which consists of an attempt to incorporate Bourdieu's propositions regarding social capital into the scheme of definitions based on doctrines and civic morals, as if something of the same kind were on the agenda. This publication on “Social Capital and Corruption: Vote buying and the politics of reform in Thailand” has as its main objective of “examining the ethics of social capital, using Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of networks as defined by their limits. I argue that social capital only assumes conceptual coherence when distinguished from its complementary opposite” (Callahan, 2005). However, it assumes that the “aim of social capital theory is to progressively expand the network of networks and their shared norms to eventually include everyone. In this essay, I address the normative problem of social capital by expanding both the quantitative argument (more is better, less is worse) and the qualitative argument (civil versus uncivil capital)” (Callahan, 2005, 499). As a conclusion, it is highlighted that “in this essay, I have expanded on Bourdieu's conception of social capital to reorient research in this area. I have tried to underscore the importance of probing he is a complementary relationship between civil and uncivil capital. Rather than asking how much social capital a society has, I have asked how the civil and the uncivil define each other. In this case, exploring the intimate connection between corruption and social capital by analysing the dynamic of vote buying and political reform in Thailand” (Callahan, 2005, 495–505).

However, this case represents only one modality of using social science formulations for some “cause.” In addition to “democracy,” as seen, the definitions of social capital are also at the base of a set of publications on “education,” which in the case of the US tends to focus on the problems of “social integration” to the detriment of those of “inequality,” hence the lesser importance attributed to Bourdieu's definitions (Dika & Singn, 2002). Significantly, in this case, one of the few works dedicated to the effects of social capital based on Bourdieu's propositions focuses on students of Mexican origin in the US, that is, situations in subaltern social conditions (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995).

In any case, this type of work having social capital, or something related as a theme is always linked to some “cause.” But this can involve different levels and school disciplines, such as education, health, politics, policies in the most different sectors, “well-being,” the degree of “happiness,” professional or economic success, and so on. It so happens that the starting point, as it deals with some “cause,” is always a “practical” problem and, therefore, the social sciences can only be conceived and appropriated as instrumentalization of understanding and intervention schemes in “causes”. This

does not seem to constitute something new in the uses of social sciences and sociology. The great novelty is the taking of explicitly prescriptive doctrines as the legitimate foundation of “theoretical” bases.

Although there are occasional references to authors considered as references in sociology, these are generally arguments from authority and appropriations based on principles of current civic morality. In this way, social integration or any other category ceases to be associated with a problem of sociological analysis and becomes a rule of prescription. However, as this process of conceptual definition through specifications of what would make up social capital, despite being disconnected from sociological theories and limited to what is considered a “concept”, obeys different logics of action and perspectives, it ends up incorporating different principles and criteria. In the limit, this results in the different “glossaries” of conceptual definitions available (e.g., Moore and Kawachi, 2017, among others).

In this conceptual definition process based on attribute specifications, the problem of the multidimensionality of social structures emerges. Although multidimensionality is often mentioned in conceptual definitions of social capital, in general, it is about distinct attributes or components of what is considered social capital, which is qualified as a dimension. The multidimensionality of social structures in the sociological sense is not considered. In general, the conceptualization of social capital is about any type of link that refers to some form of social integration, usually having main components such as “trust” and “network”. Consequently, just as for some critics, such as Fine (2000, 25–39), social capital cannot be considered as such, for others, everything can be included in the “concept.” At the extreme, there is even a defence of classifying the most specific social ties, such as family (Prandini, 2014) or religion (Lim & Putnam, 2010) among others, as constitutive and should be classified as social capital.

The few works with pretensions of discussing more directly the theoretical or epistemological foundations tend to be restricted to an extremely formal level, such as, school nominal classifications of epistemological positions (e.g., the various texts with the objective of the theoretical discussion presented in Arriagada and Miranda, 2003). In general, discussions involving theoretical issues related to social capital are self-reported (e.g., Brehm and Rahn, 1977).

If, on the one hand, there is a set of publications focused on the foundation or exegesis of conceptual definitions of social capital in doctrinal terms, on the other hand, others are more directly aimed at evaluating its “practical” application. This occurs especially through the support of large international organizations such as the World Bank, among others that operate at the regional level, such as ECLAC. Faced with the enormous amount of this type of material, it is enough to take an exemplary case that seems very representative. This is the seminar held in 2003 (Arriagada & Miranda, 2003) on “Social capital: analytical and sociological potentialities for overcoming poverty.” It is an event that, like others of this type, called for “researchers from research centres and academic units, representatives of international agencies and executors of social policies” (Arriagada & Miranda, 2003, 9). Therefore, representatives of the social sciences at the university level and mediators are present. An exegesis of the definitions is presented based on the doctrines that underlie “pluralism” and the current civic morality (Arriagada, 2003, 12–29). It is an exegesis centred on nominal and formal definitions without regard for the underlying theoretical and epistemological foundations. Despite differences in theoretical and epistemological bases, positions and formulations such as Bourdieu’s are listed as mere nominal differences in conceptual definitions (e. g. Arriagada, 2003, 14). This is taken as the foundation of the differences of this author compared to other definitions of social capital. Other texts by participants go in the same direction (e.g., Siles, 2003, 42).

On the other hand, in this type of discussion, clashes between diverse or contrary positions are programmed. However, these are not positions contrary to the theoretical and epistemological foundations involved in current definitions of social capital, but generic and abstract questions related to the validity of the existence of the “concept” of social capital taken in broad terms and its effects and reason for being (Boisler, 2003; Filgueira, 2003; Bahamondes, 2003, Hopenhayn, 2003 among others).

In more formal and “practical” terms, although also with scholarly pretensions, these conceptual definitions are specified in categories in different “methodological” proposals. One of the most widespread formalizations into categories and respective empirical investigation questionnaires is that of the World Value Survey (<https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>). What is worth noting is that both this organization's questionnaires and others of the same kind can be taken as a codified synthesis of what any school manual on civic morals, particularly originating in the US, defines as modes of an engagement or associative or political civics. This is the list of forms of organization and modalities of activities formally considered as belonging to “civil society” or associative and political activities. It is not by chance that all the organizations contemplated have a formal and even official character. That is, the “social” in its civic version and its officialization are mixed, which even clashes with the theories or interpretation schemes of the representation of interests in vogue.

Social capital as an intervention scheme, extra-Western social structures, and the problem of agent training

A more general characteristic of the literature on social capital consists of problems regarding its effectiveness as a mechanism of social intervention. This also involves the most central conditions because the efforts in its practical application cover the most diverse situations and school disciplines focused on “practical” problems. However, concerning the central conditions, the most discussed problems tend to be related to the absence or relative weakness of the adoption of the doctrines that support the definitions of social capital in vogue. In addition, under these conditions, another axis of concern is the presence of what is considered “bad” social capital, whose definition is centred on “strong” ties with the group itself, as opposed to “linkage” or ties that serve as “bridges” for mediation with other groups (Burt, 2001; Portes, 2014).

On the other hand, concerning the different conditions of extra-Western or peripheral social structures, the diversity and depth of problems in the definitions and use of social capital as an intervention instrument in this perspective of civic morality are much more generalized and acute. Although never mentioned in the bibliography on social capital because it would not make sense from the adopted perspective, in addition to refusing to discuss more general problems, the assumption of the universalization of western cultural and institutional models as something natural is on the agenda.

This causes a series of developments and specifications for the instrumentalization of interventions in peripheral conditions, among which the appreciation of categories such as “community,” in addition to other “participation” mechanisms, stands out. In any case, despite these developments and specifications, significantly, in a work on the results of interventions by international organizations in Latin America, it is highlighted that the notions of social capital in use are similar to those of the so-called “theory of political culture” (Hermet, 2000). It is the perspective that assumes the universalization of US cultural and institutional models as natural and evident, with emphasis on the respective civic morality. This expansion of the uses of the notion of social capital in peripheral or extra-Western conditions has the effect of multiplying and diversifying the concrete contexts and issues at hand.

This is reinforced by the fact that in non-central conditions many of the authors involved with the study of social capital are not the most strongly converted in the interpretation schemes in question. This results in a greater variety of perspectives and problems raised, and even dialogues between deaf people. Under these conditions, a quite common position consists of the pure and simple application of the prevailing notions of social capital based on civic morals. For this type of author and work, everything that is seen as socially positive is attributed to the effects of social capital. The opposite of this is constituted not only by the peripheral conditions but by the presence of what is considered as the “bad” social capital, that is, based on ties with the group itself to the detriment of broader relationships which facilitate mediation (Burt, 2001; Portes, 2014).

In addition, more peripheral conditions also have the effect of making misunderstandings more evident in the clashes between conceptual definitions and different theoretical and epistemological foundations. It is particularly about the clashes of definitions based on the premises of civic morality with Bourdieu's definition of social capital. Although references to Bourdieu's conceptualizations are very rare, they can occur both in more central and peripheral situations. But it is in these peripheral conditions that there are some more striking exemplary cases of attempts to appropriate and criticize Bourdieu's definitions from the perspective of the doctrines and civic morals that underlie the other definitions. This makes the formation of a kind of “autonomization” of a theme even more evident based on conceptual definitions, without reference to the respective theoretical and epistemological bases, as already indicated through the exemplary case of Callahan's interpretations (2005).

Final considerations

Despite the strong expansion of publications related to what is considered social capital, the themes and problems involving the social sciences and particularly sociology are practically not addressed. This may be due to the conceptions and theoretical and epistemological bases of the conceptual definitions on the agenda in these works, which are strongly self-reported and centred on discussions of the “concept”. A common element of the set of this type of publication consists in the absence of addressing problems related to the theoretical and epistemological foundations underlying the conceptual definitions and their relations with the social sciences.

According to the general hypothesis on which this text is based, the general characteristic of these works related to social capital does not result only from some fragility, but from the general conception of social sciences that tends to impose itself in unusual conditions. Although one of the basic elements of these works is the centrality of “practical” objectives, a set of principles that go far beyond that are also on the agenda. The use of the social sciences with a view to “practical” problems has always been one of the characteristics of this area of knowledge. However, these “practical” uses have always been associated with certain conditions and segments of professional practice. It is especially about

those segments more directly linked to the most peripheral poles or in association with the so-called applied social sciences.

Therefore, in addition to the centrality of “practical” objectives, what configures these works related to social capital consists of a conception of social sciences referred to other parameters of the definition of its foundations, criteria of excellence, and reason for being. As is well known, historically the constitution of the social sciences has one of its foundations in the efforts and intellectual resources directed towards its integration with epistemological and theoretical conceptions based on rationalism and, therefore, in its detachment from the bases that underlie doctrines and beliefs. In turn, the set of works related to social capital, in its almost totality, has its theoretical and epistemological foundations based almost exclusively on doctrines. Although practically never explained as such and not confronted with the foundations of what constitutes the social sciences or sociology, it deals with the doctrines that constitute the political philosophies and civic morals that ended up constituting the so-called “pluralism.”

There are several direct consequences of these works concerning social capital, among which is its legitimation in association with these historically and socially successful doctrines. It is particularly about what is associated with “social integration” and related matters, however, no longer as a problem of sociological investigation, but as a precept and moral prescription. This is directly associated with another general element of this type of work, which is its very high degree of redundancy. In general, the results obtained by empirical measurement are already included in the formulation of the “problem” under investigation. This stems from the foundations of this type of work based on doctrines to the detriment of assumptions based on rationalism that, by definition, claim universality. In turn, the principles that underlie the doctrines that support these works, like any doctrine or belief, have validity restricted to those who share it.

In addition to the new legitimation conditions and the effects on the valuation patterns of the social sciences, the expansion of works related to social capital can also have effects on its segmentation and uses. The historical bipolarity between the conceptions and uses of the social sciences has on the one hand, the perspective of a problem of scientific investigation in association with the respective objects and their theoretical and epistemological foundation. On the other hand, more directly associated with more peripheral conditions and objectives focused on “practical” problems and the formulation and legitimation of “causes” and “solutions”, a second pole stands out. However, the expansion of works related to social capital indicates the emergence of a new pattern in this division and the segmentation of teaching and professional practice in the social sciences. Its uses are not restricted to something aimed at “practical” problems but include reasoning based on political doctrines and respective civic morals. This tends to include the poles considered central, whether in institutional, teaching, or editorial terms, based on this type of “theoretical and epistemological” foundation.

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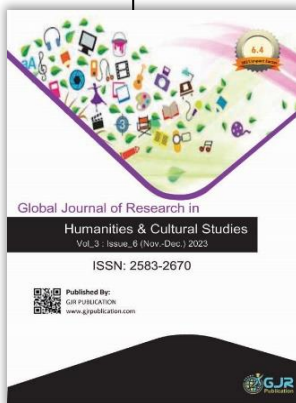
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