

CHAPTER 16

Introduction

BY VIRTUALLY EVERY CONCEIVABLE MEASURE, social capital has eroded steadily and sometimes dramatically over the past two generations. The quantitative evidence is overwhelming, yet most Americans did not need to see charts and graphs to know that something bad has been happening in their communities and in their country. Americans have had a growing sense at some visceral level of disintegrating social bonds. It is perhaps no coincidence that on the eve of the millennium the market for civic nostalgia was hotter than the market for blue-chip stocks. For example, newscaster Tom Brokaw's book profiling the heroic World War II generation got mixed reviews from critics yet was a runaway best-seller. In Los Angeles there was an on-again, off-again movement to rename the LAX airport after the actor Jimmy Stewart, a military hero in real life who brought civic heroes Jefferson Smith and George Bailey to the silver screen. American nostalgia in the late twentieth century is no run-of-the-mill, rosy-eyed remembrance of things past. It is an attempt to recapture a time when public-spiritedness really did carry more value and when communities really did "work." As we buy books and rename airports, we seem to be saying that at a profound level civic virtue and social capital do matter.

Are we right? Does social capital have salutary effects on individuals, communities, or even entire nations? Yes, an impressive and growing body of research suggests that civic connections help make us healthy, wealthy, and wise. Living without social capital is not easy, whether one is a villager in southern Italy or a poor person in the American inner city or a well-heeled entrepreneur in a high-tech industrial district.

If we are to believe that social capital benefits individuals and communities, we must first understand how social capital works its magic. High levels of trust and citizen participation operate through a variety of mechanisms to produce socially desirable outcomes. Obviously the mechanism(s) at work will vary by the circumstance and outcome in question. But in general social capital has many features that help people translate aspirations into realities.

First, social capital allows citizens to resolve collective problems more easily. Social scientists have long been concerned about "dilemmas" of collective action. Such dilemmas are ubiquitous, and their dynamics are straightforward. People often might all be better off if they cooperate, with each doing her share. But each individual benefits more by shirking her responsibility, hoping that others will do the work for her. Moreover, even if she is wrong and the others shirk, too, she is still better off than if she had been the only sucker. Obviously if every individual thinks that the others will do the work, nobody will end up taking part, and all will be left worse off than if all had contributed.

Supporting government through a tax system is a dilemma of collective action. So is limiting lawn sprinklers and long showers during arid summers. These and other coordination challenges go by various names—"collective-action problems," "the prisoner's dilemma," "the free-rider problem," and "the tragedy of the commons," to name a few. But they all share one feature: They are best solved by an institutional mechanism with the power to ensure compliance with the collectively desirable behavior. Social norms and the networks that enforce them provide such a mechanism.

Second, social capital greases the wheels that allow communities to advance smoothly. Where people are trusting and trustworthy, and where they are subject to repeated interactions with fellow citizens, everyday business and social transactions are less costly. There is no need to spend time and money making sure that others will uphold their end of the arrangement or penalizing them if they don't. Economists such as Oliver Williamson and political scientists such as Elinor Ostrom have demonstrated how social capital translates into financial capital and resource wealth for businesses and self-governing units. Indeed, the Nobel Prize-winning economist Kenneth Arrow has concluded, "Virtually every commercial transaction has within itself an element of trust, certainly any transaction conducted over a period of time. It can be plausibly argued that much of the economic backwardness in the world can be explained by a lack of mutual confidence."¹

A third way in which social capital improves our lot is by widening our awareness of the many ways in which our fates are linked. People who have active and trusting connections to others—whether family members, friends, or fellow bowlers—develop or maintain character traits that are good for the rest of society. Joiners become more tolerant, less cynical, and more empathetic to the misfortunes of others. When people lack connections to others, they are unable to test the veracity of their own views, whether in the give-and-take of

casual conversation or in more formal deliberation. Without such an opportunity, people are more likely to be swayed by their worst impulses. It is no coincidence that random acts of violence, such as the 1999 spate of schoolyard shootings, tend to be committed by people identified, after the fact, as "loners."

The networks that constitute social capital also serve as conduits for the flow of helpful information that facilitates achieving our goals. For example, as we shall see in chapter 19, many Americans—perhaps even most of us—get our jobs through personal connections. If we lack that social capital, economic sociologists have shown, our economic prospects are seriously reduced, even if we have lots of talent and training ("human capital"). Similarly, communities that lack civic interconnections find it harder to share information and thus mobilize to achieve opportunities or resist threats.

Social capital also operates through psychological and biological processes to improve individuals' lives. Mounting evidence suggests that people whose lives are rich in social capital cope better with traumas and fight illness more effectively. Social capital appears to be a complement, if not a substitute, for Prozac, sleeping pills, antacids, vitamin C, and other drugs we buy at the corner pharmacy. "Call me [or indeed almost anyone] in the morning" might actually be better medical advice than "Take two aspirin" as a cure for what ails us.

To clarify how these mechanisms operate in practice, consider the following stylized example, which, while technically fabricated, depicts reality for many parents. Bob and Rosemary Smith, parents of six-year-old Jonathan, live in an urban community that is full of both delights and troubles. Bob and Rosemary support public education in principle, and they would like their first-grader to be exposed to children from diverse backgrounds, an opportunity that the public schools provide. But the Smiths' local elementary school is a shambles: teachers are demoralized, paint is chipping off the walls, and there is no money for extracurricular activities or computer equipment. Worried about Jonathan's ability to learn and thrive in this environment, Bob and Rosemary have a choice. They can pull their child out of the public schools and pay dearly to put him in a private school, or they can stick around and try to improve the public school. What to do?

Let's suppose that the Smiths want to stick around and start a Parent-Teacher Association at Jonathan's school. The chances that they will be able to do so will depend upon two things: the existence of other concerned parents who are also likely to join; and the likelihood that such an association will be effective in improving conditions at the school. Here social capital comes in. The more the Smiths know and trust their neighbors, the greater their ability to recruit and retain reliable members of the new PTA. In cohesive neighborhoods filled with lots of overlapping connections, individuals more easily learn who can be counted on, and they can make better use of moral suasion to ensure continued attention to the problems at hand.

Let's assume the Smiths succeed in starting the PTA, and several months later it has an active membership of seventeen parents. What does this new institution, this addition to the stock of social capital, do for the individuals involved and for the community at large? For one, belonging to the PTA almost certainly inculcates civic skills in parents. People who might never have designed a project, given a presentation, lobbied a public official, or even spoken up at a meeting are pressed to do so. What's more, the PTA serves to establish and enforce norms of commitment and performance on the part of school officials, teachers, and perhaps even students. It also allows for the deepening of interpersonal bonds and "we-ness" between families and educators. On a more personal note, the PTA meetings are bound to establish, or strengthen, norms of reciprocity and mutual concern among parents. These connections will almost certainly pay off in myriad unexpected ways in the future. If Bob loses his job, he will now have fifteen other adults upon whom he can call for employment leads or even for simple moral support. If Rosemary decides to start a lobbying group to press for better child health facilities in the city, she will have fifteen other potential lobbyists to aid in her cause. At the very least, Bob and Rosemary will have another couple or two with whom they can catch a movie on Friday nights. All these gains—civic skills, social support, professional contacts, volunteer labor, moviegoing partners—arose because the Smiths wanted to put computers in their kid's school.

Community connectedness is not just about warm fuzzy tales of civic triumph. In measurable and well-documented ways, social capital makes an enormous difference in our lives. This section considers five illustrative fields: child welfare and education; healthy and productive neighborhoods; economic prosperity; health and happiness; and democratic citizenship and government performance. I present evidence that social capital makes us smarter, healthier, safer, richer, and better able to govern a just and stable democracy.

MOST OF THE EVIDENCE that I present is drawn from the work of other scholars in many disciplines. In addition, I seek analytic leverage by comparing differences in social capital and civic engagement across the fifty states. Since those comparisons will appear in several different guises, it is useful to describe the geographic pattern of social capital in contemporary America.

To rate average social capital of the various states, we have combined a number of independent measures, which are summarized in table 4. From a variety of sources we have compiled state-level measures of participation in a range of civic and political activities during the preceding year, including group membership, attendance at public meetings on town or school affairs, service as an officer or committee member for some local organization, attendance at club meetings, volunteer work and community projects,² home enter-

Table 4: Measuring Social Capital in the American States

| <i>Components of Comprehensive Social Capital Index</i> | <i>Correlation with Index</i> |
|--|-------------------------------|
| Measures of community organizational life | |
| Served on committee of local organization in last year (percent) | 0.88 |
| Served as officer of some club or organization in last year (percent) | 0.83 |
| Civic and social organizations per 1,000 population | 0.78 |
| Mean number of club meetings attended in last year | 0.78 |
| Mean number of group memberships | 0.74 |
| Measures of engagement in public affairs | |
| Turnout in presidential elections, 1988 and 1992 | 0.84 |
| Attended public meeting on town or school affairs in last year (percent) | 0.77 |
| Measures of community volunteerism | |
| Number of nonprofit (501[c]3) organizations per 1,000 population | 0.82 |
| Mean number of times worked on community project in last year | 0.65 |
| Mean number of times did volunteer work in last year | 0.66 |
| Measures of informal sociability | |
| Agree that "I spend a lot of time visiting friends" | 0.73 |
| Mean number of times entertained at home in last year | 0.67 |
| Measures of social trust | |
| Agree that "Most people can be trusted" | 0.92 |
| Agree that "Most people are honest" | 0.84 |

taining and socializing with friends,³ social trust,⁴ electoral turnout,⁵ and the incidence of nonprofit organizations and civic associations.⁶

These fourteen indicators of formal and informal community networks and social trust are in turn sufficiently intercorrelated that they appear to tap a single underlying dimension. In other words, these fourteen indicators measure related but distinct facets of community-based social capital, and we have combined them into a single Social Capital Index.⁷ Table 4 summarizes these fourteen indicators and their correlation with the summary index.

Differences among the states on the underlying measures are substantial, with ratios of roughly three to one between high- and low-ranking states. Social trust, for example, ranges from 17 percent in Mississippi to 67 percent in North Dakota. The average number of associational memberships per capita varies from 1.3 in Louisiana and North Carolina to 3.3 in North Dakota.

Turnout in recent presidential elections has varied between 42 percent in South Carolina and 69 percent in Minnesota. The number of nonprofit organizations per 1,000 inhabitants ranges from 1.2 in Mississippi to 3.6 in Vermont. The average number of club meetings attended per year varies from 4 in Nevada to 11 in North and South Dakota. The rate of volunteering varies from 5 times per year in Nevada, Mississippi, and Louisiana to twice that in Utah. The fraction of the population who report attending a public meeting on town or school affairs in the previous year ranges from 10 percent in Georgia and New York to 32 percent in New Hampshire, 29 percent in Utah, and 26 percent in Wisconsin.

The correlations in table 4 imply that these interstate differences go together. Places with dense associational networks tend to have frequent public meetings on local issues, places that have high electoral turnout tend to have high social trust, places with lots of local clubs tend to support many nonprofit organizations, and so on. Figure 80 maps the differences in social capital and civic engagement across the American states, much like a weather map.

Geographically speaking, the national social-capital "barometric map" is fairly straightforward. The primary "high-pressure" zone is centered over the headwaters of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers and extends east and west along the Canadian border. The primary "low-pressure" area is centered over the Mississippi Delta and extends outward in rising concentric circles through the former Confederacy.⁸ California and the mid-Atlantic states lie near the national average.⁹ We can explore, at least in a preliminary way, the effects of different levels of social capital by comparing the quality of life in these different states. Minnesota and Mississippi differ from one another in many ways, not merely in their level of social capital, so we must be cautious about inferring causation from mere correlation, but the contrasts summarized in figure 80 provide a useful initial test bed for exploring what difference social capital might make.

Even a cursory glance at this map of America's social-capital resources leads one to ask, "Where in the world did these differences come from?" Answering that question in detail is a task for another day, but this pattern has deep historical roots. Alexis de Tocqueville, patron saint of contemporary social capitalists, observed precisely the same pattern in his travels in the America of the 1830s, attributing it, at least in part, to patterns of settlement:

As one goes farther south [from New England], one finds a less active municipal life; the township has fewer officials, rights, and duties; the population does not exercise such a direct influence on affairs; the town meetings are less frequent and deal with fewer matters. For this reason the power of the elected official is comparatively greater and that of the voter less; municipal spirit is less wide awake and less strong. . . . Most of

the immigrants who founded the northwestern states came from New England, and they brought the administrative habits of their old home to the new.¹⁰

Well-trod paths of migration helped establish regional and local patterns of social capital in contemporary America. These interstate differences are astonishingly similar to differences in "state political culture" as drawn from the 1950s by political historian Daniel Elazar, who traced them in turn to patterns of nineteenth-century immigration. One surprisingly strong predictor of the degree of social capital in any state in the 1990s is, for example, the fraction of its population that is of Scandinavian stock.¹¹

Still more striking is the spatial correlation between low social capital at the end of the twentieth century and slavery in the first half of the nineteenth century. The more virulent the system of slavery then, the less civic the state today. Slavery was, in fact, a social system *designed* to destroy social capital among slaves and between slaves and freemen. Well-established networks of reciprocity among the oppressed would have raised the risk of rebellion, and egalitarian bonds of sympathy between slave and free would have undermined the very legitimacy of the system. After emancipation the dominant classes in the South continued to have a strong interest in inhibiting horizontal social networks. It is not happenstance that the lowest levels of community-based social capital are found where a century of plantation slavery was followed by a century of Jim Crow politics. Inequality and social solidarity are deeply incompatible.

Whether patterns of immigration and slavery provide the sole explanation for contemporary differences in levels of social capital is an issue that deserves more concerted attention than I can devote to it here. However, the clear historical continuities are relevant to one aspect of our current inquiry—whether social capital is a cause or merely an effect of contemporary social circumstance. If regional and local patterns of civic engagement and social connectedness were evanescent and mutable, then correlations between social capital and other social facts (like educational performance or public health or crime) might well reflect the *effect* of those factors *on* social capital. If, on the other hand, regional and local profiles of social capital represent long-standing traditions, then it is more plausible that social capital is a *cause*, not merely an *effect*, of contemporary social circumstance.

THE EVIDENCE I PRESENT in this section on the wide range of individual and collective benefits from social capital, while impressive in its scope, is neither exhaustive nor conclusive. Scholars in fields as far-flung as medicine, criminology, economics, urban sociology, and state politics are actively exploring the correlates and consequences of social capital. Much more work will be needed

to prove the power of social capital and, in particular, to show in detail how and when its effects are clearest and most beneficial. I do not offer the generalizations in this section as the final word. But the evidence we review shows that in measurable ways it *matters* that social capital and civic engagement have declined in America over the last several decades. The same evidence strongly suggests that in many disparate domains important to Americans today more social capital and civic engagement would improve things.