Debate

Contesting social capital: a response to Elke Zuern

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I very much welcome Elke Zuern’s comment on my piece on social capital (Fine 2004a). With minor qualifications,¹ I agree in substance with her arguments. There does, however, seem to be some dispute over conclusions. In particular, she claims: (1) that social capital cannot be wished away despite its analytical weaknesses in principle, and in practice from a progressive perspective (I agree with this); (2) that continuing critique is essential (I could hardly be accused of otherwise); and (3) that this implies there is a continuing role for social capital in progressive scholarship, not least in incorporating the messiness of social reality as a tool of development in a broader context than is usually accommodated.²

The last point is the only one on which I have doubts. These are not absolute. I would use ‘social capital’ in specific circumstances in which I was convinced that desirable benefits would accrue, and I can hardly deny the same dispensation to others. The issue is rather what are the circumstances under which this is liable to arise. Could we claim the same for progressive use of neo-liberalism or monetarism, for example? Further, my experience in the case of social capital is that it is hard to get anyone, including social capitalists, to respond to my criticisms. Rather, the response is ‘fair enough but I will be less guilty than others and my intent is progressive’. Yet social capital continues to be dominated by a juggernaut of orthodoxy.

This suggests that there is a chasm between such individual intent and social outcome, something, with tongue firmly in cheek, which can only be resolved by examining the ‘social capital’ of social capital. One of its most endearing and enduring features is its capacity to respond to devastating criticism either by ignoring or by absorbing it, a repressive tolerance that allows all to belong while its core content remains unruffled, let alone transformed.
This is not to suggest that key concepts cannot be turned, which is why I draw the contrast with globalisation as an even more prominent concept reflecting intellectual trends over the past decade (Fine 2004b). It has, despite conceptual weaknesses and origins within the neo-liberal project, served as a filter for progressive scholarship. Imperialism, the ideology par excellence of the British Empire, was turned into its opposite by Lenin and independence struggles. Closer to home, consider the way in which ‘the mixed economy’ was used as a retreat from the Freedom Charter to concede that all would not be nationalised by an ANC government. This contrasts to its serving as a rationale for the extension of public ownership in Britain after the Second World War. And the RDP (Reconstruction and Development Program) remains ambiguous and contested in serving to defend redistribution or to promote the neo-liberal GEAR (Growth, Employment and Redistribution) strategy.

Thus the meaning, content and thrust of concepts can be turned, even reversed. In the case of social capital, the presumption that it can be turned has to be set against the points already made above, and in my original article, two overwhelming factors that determine its position and continuing momentum. One is the body of literature that already exists, and the ‘paradigms’ that it has created and in which it moves. The other is the extent to which social capital is ‘owned’ by the World Bank (Fine 2003), with its capacity to fund, set agendas, include and exclude, popularise and promote, etc. Concession after concession has to be made in engaging with this world of social capital.

To construct a parallel, if engaging, universe of critical social capital one is more liable to legitimise than to undermine the orthodoxy since it is enabled to claim, before moving on, ‘Look, social capital must be OK, it has its critics’. At the very least, the case for social capital has to be located at the outset in the most broadly situated context rather than in ex post facto confessions of failure, all too common among those in the world of development who engage with the orthodoxy but retain their sense of purpose and integrity.

Notes
1. In particular, first, I see social capital as a – and not the – marker of economic imperialism, with its being much more significant as an appropriation of social theory through its prism. Second, the putative and, as yet, far from extensive, reintroduction of Bourdieu would undermine the universalising claims of
social capital; to use the vernacular, each application would occupy its own specific field and habitus.

2. Although, as observed for the World Bank social capitalists, this is precisely their, primarily thwarted, goal of civilising economists!

3. My favourite example is the term ‘royalty’, originally a payment to the crown, now a payment to the private citizen, usually for pro rata sales (Fine 1990).

References


