

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Barbara Arneil, *Diverse Communities: The Problem with Social Capital*. Cambridge University Press, 2006, 280 pp., \$US 29.99 paper (0-521-67390-9), \$US 75.00 hardcover (0-521-85719-8).

In many academic and policy circles, social capital is celebrated for improving educational outcomes, making people happier, improving the functioning of political institutions and even making people healthier. Most prominent among its proponents is Robert Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone*, who argues for the centrality of social capital for democratic vitality and worries about the repercussion of a decline in social capital for the United States.

But is social capital really so wonderful? Not necessarily, says Barbara Arneil in *Diverse Communities: The Problem with Social Capital*. In fact, there is good reason to think that a fixation with social capital is misguided, even downright dangerous for less powerful groups in society, such as women, ethnoracial minorities, gays and lesbians, and people with disabilities. Arneil's book presents an extended critique of Putnam's conceptualization of social capital, his story of decline, and the solutions he proposes to reverse this decline.

Arneil's first chapter is a very helpful discussion of the conceptual underpinnings of different definitions of social capital. The "American school" of social capital, as she terms it, includes writers such as de Tocqueville, Almond and Verba, Coleman, and most recently Putnam. While there are differences among them, they share an interest in social capital as an instrumental tool used for a functional end; a focus on the quantity of social capital rather than its nature or content; and, especially in Putnam's version, a concern about social cohesion or what Arneil terms a neorepublican vision of civic society.

Arneil contrasts this American understanding of social capital to a European one elaborated by theorists such as Bourdieu and Gramsci. Through this alternative lens, social capital, like other forms of capital, emerges from a historical accumulation that gives power to certain groups over others. Civil society is not a benign arena for cohesion, but a place of contestation and conflict infused by processes of inclusion and exclusion. Paying particular attention to the experiences of women and minorities, Arneil's analysis is informed by a feminist lens and multi-

cultural political theory. For her, the central issue is not social cohesion, but justice.

The bulk of the book deconstructs and critiques Putnam's *Bowling Alone*. Arneil notes that Putnam's account draws on a "fundamentally Christian narrative (paradise, the fall, the promise of redemption)" in which he outlines "an idyllic and unified 'American community' of the past [that] has, over the last thirty years, 'fallen' apart, and can be redeemed in the future only through a renewed commitment to civic participation and unity" (p. 2). She attacks each part of this argument. The high point of social capital, which Putnam places in the Progressive Era, had a dark and oppressive side for women, ethnic and racial minorities, and those with disabilities. Civic unity, based on shared norms and a Christian vision of progress, meant forced assimilation for many immigrants and native Americans, exclusion of African Americans, forced sterilization for the disabled, and the assumption that women would work for the social capital of others and their community, but not their own empowerment. In a theme that she repeats throughout the book, Arneil contends that division, diversity, and conflict during this period should be celebrated as challenging the dominance of white, native-born, middle-class men, ultimately leading to greater justice and equality in American society.

Arneil disaggregates two separate parts of what Putnam calls social capital, distinguishing generalized social trust from organizational membership. She is skeptical that organizational membership has declined to the degree that Putnam states, noting that many new organizations have arisen over the 20th century. Putnam focuses on longstanding organizations to show temporal trends, but Arneil argues that these traditional organizations were so firmly grounded in exclusions that we should not be surprised that they elicit little interest among contemporary Americans. Rather, we should focus on the myriad of new organizations that have formed and flourished since then.

When it comes to social trust, Arneil agrees with Putnam that the evidence shows a decline in individuals' reported trust in others, but she disputes the idea that this is necessarily a problem. Given economic instability and growing inequality over the last thirty years, as well as crises in political leadership, Arneil argues it is no surprise that Americans have less trust. She also makes a forceful argument that we must not only theorize the decline in social trust, but also the gap in social trust between different social groups. Highlighting the much lower trust of African Americans, she suggests that the dashed hopes of cultural and racial minorities following the civil rights movement reveals Americans' legitimate sense of betrayal. Arneil is troubled by calls for a "moderate middle" in American politics, instead asserting, "What needs to be

recognized by those scholars who seek now simply to assert a common middle against the noisy margins is that dissonance, pulling apart and profound conflict have always been, and may once again turn out to be, the very stuff upon which justice is achieved” (p. 159). The civil rights movement, she notes, did not succeed by accepting the social and organizational norms of the time.

Arneil ends her book by expressing deep reservations about some of the proposed solutions to the decline in social capital, especially calls for a return to religious activity and the use of post-September 11 patriotism to revitalize the ties that bind American citizens. She is also deeply suspicious of solutions that propose more part-time work options if such prescriptions ignore the gendered nature of work and family relations. As Arneil argues, persuasively, “the shift from full-time to part-time work may benefit civic associations, but what happens to the benefits that previously accrued to society through women’s full-time paid work, and what happens to the woman herself once she is made more economically dependent on and therefore vulnerable to her spouse?” (p. 98).

Instead, Arneil argues that any discussion of social capital must acknowledge “the historical reality of exclusion, assimilation and eradication in the civic life of America,” and recognize the particular, and distinct, justice claims made by various minorities in civic society (p. 211). The solution to distrust and injustice, Arneil maintains, lies in the coercive power of state intervention through Congress and the courts, not a grassroots, normative, social capital espoused by Putnam.

Ultimately, Arneil should be required reading alongside *Bowling Alone*. Her arguments about the power dynamics undergirding social capital and the importance of conflict offer a critical corrective to a rose-coloured view of social cohesion and trust. Those unfamiliar with Putnam’s work will likely have difficulty following the detailed critique, and some readers may feel that the attack on Putnam becomes overly strident. It would have been nice if Arneil had widened the discussion beyond Putnam’s work to consider other uses and conceptualizations of social capital in academia and policy circles. Some may also find that certain critiques advanced by Arneil are quibbles, but the central argument is a significant contribution to debates over social capital and civil society.

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