



EMBEDDING SOCIAL CAPITAL IN PLACE AND COMMUNITY: TOWARDS A NEW PARADIGM FOR THE CARIBBEAN FOOD SYSTEM

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Abstract: Economic ideas of social capital often narrow the social domain to transactions based on individualised motivations (i.e., profit) leaving out more social possibilities which may or may not involve maximising personal consumption (i.e., fights for 'social justice,' nationalism). This narrowing of vision has real-life consequences, implicated not only in dominant economic theory, but also in socio-economic policies for 'development.' In order to tackle challenges to local and regional food security in the Caribbean, we must open policy-making to more encompassing (Dumont, 1966) motivations for economic behaviour linked to the creation of social identities within and between people. As a step towards this end, the author incorporates Sen's concept of commitment and related theories of identity formation into analyses of food production in the Caribbean, and Cuba in particular.

Keywords: *social capital; development; food security; Caribbean; commitment; Cuba.*

INTRODUCTION

If the idea of social capital in economics is a process, then it is a very specific one. Indeed, some may even argue that the very expression 'social capital' is a contradiction in terms. While 'capital' implies a link between human and object (whether real or imaginary, i.e., derivatives), the origins of the word 'social'—'to follow' (Callon and Latour, 1981, p.283)—involve human-to-human relations. In this paper, I argue that the narrow view of social capital presently dominating economic debates about development policy has practical effects. These are related to the very act of 'translating' (Latour, 1981) social

needs and identities into universal motivations for all economic behaviour. Models for social capital that attempt to account for the interface between society and economics in utilitarian terms are largely based on three assumptions. They are (1) that social networks are driven by a collection of individuals who strive to optimise their personal preferences, especially remuneration in money, (2) that this kind of social 'networking' (and, as implicated in what follows, it is just one kind) is positive for the well-being (read: 'development') of collective groupings, such as nation states and (3) that those who uphold the utilitarian idea of social

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capital have the authority as ‘macro-actors’ to define ‘micro-social’ action (Callon and Latour, 1981) in causal terms.

In what follows, I will break down the assumptions (especially the first and third)¹ in terms of the dominant idea of social capital in economics and by extension, ‘development’. First, it is briefly argued that the idea of social capital in economics not only obstructs the analyst from seeing economic action as embedded in social, cultural and historical contexts, but in reifying its own underlying premises, actively shapes the way economic behaviour is thought about and carried out. As indicated in the first assumption, the dominant view of social capital relegates all non-maximising motivations driving, for example, the production, distribution and consumption of food, into epistemological and empirical ‘black boxes’ (Callon and Latour, 1981). Indeed, social capital as a prevalent idea in economic development manifests a general rule of ‘translation’ described by Callon and Latour (1981): the act of defining simplifies reality to the exclusion of alternative, existing modes of thought and practice.

As with any normative interpretation of social behaviour, economic concepts such as social capital emphasise and actively shape certain aspects of social reality, to the exclusion of others (assumption no. 3). This kind of categorical switching from theory to practice has significant implications for the present and future state of rural (and urban) ‘development’ in the Caribbean and elsewhere. A purely utilitarian understanding of social networks may, for example, lead to policies that reinforce existing patterns of optimising behaviour (i.e., the conversion of agricultural lands into profit-making, industrial enterprise), instead of policies that further the livelihoods and locally-defined well-being of

rural Caribbean communities (i.e., sustaining and empowering people to maintain ties to land and community).

If one goes beyond universalistic conceptions of social capital to consider the way social networks work in *particular* communities—later, the focus will be in Cuba—it becomes clear that the parameters of social capital are more profound than that which the narrow model permits. Switching from the formal model to ethnographic reality allows for a more realistic account of socio-economic transactions. Using analytical tools spearheaded in economics by Sen (1977, 2002), this kind of knowledge may be made relevant and accessible to development policy-makers.

The ultimate basis of this argument is that if we are to ever come close to instituting local and regional food security in the Caribbean, we must get beyond the telescopic association between social capital and individualised economic assets. Indeed, I argue that it is the very *situatedness* (in space *and* time) of forms of motivation not based on personal gain that provide our only hope for establishing and/or re-establishing ties not only between people and people, but also between people and their environment. These links are increasingly important given the urgency of the food question in the Caribbean and elsewhere.

WHAT BEHAVIOURAL AND UTILITARIAN ECONOMISTS LEAVE OUT

Revitalised in the aftermath of the latest global economic crisis, the recent shift from ‘rationality’ to ‘behaviour’ in the discipline of economics has sparked further interest in ‘non-economic’ factors that influence economic decision making such as one’s family, history of drug use or education. This

so-called 'social' turn in economics has not led to a concomitant revolution in paradigms (Kuhn, 1962), however. Indeed, it is no more than another detour towards the same destination.

Legitimised by neurological and psychological findings that link chemical changes in the brain to social competition (Delgado et al., 2008), behavioural economists claim that economic actions may be 'irrational' when treated as social performance, i.e., in an auction, bidding more than a commodity's economic value due to the adrenaline-induced desire to win. They do so, however, in static, lab settings which disregard long-term social relations.

In a similar fashion, utilitarian theorists of social capital consider individual motivation in terms of cost-benefit calculations that occur at *particular moments in time*, even if influenced by long-term psychological factors such as a past steeped in criminality. Both theoretical frameworks (the behaviouralists and the utilitarians) treat individual, psychologically-informed economic decisions as independent variables, while synchronic, often artificial social contexts become dependent variables. That one set of theorists (the behaviouralists) argue for 'irrationality' while the other (the utilitarians) argue for 'rational' decision-making has little to do with their shared assumption that long-term social processes may be treated as exogenous to an individual's economic behaviour. Indeed, neither view of economic decision-making considers how dyachronic and contextualised aspects of culture, history and society influence individual identities and decision-making.

Critics of the utilitarian approach to individual economic behaviour (Davis, 2003, 2004; Sen, 1977, 2002; Williams, 1973) have countered standard assumptions

in economics, arguing that an individual's agency to choose between social motivations (i.e., sympathy, altruism, commitment), on the one hand, and self-interest, on the other, is entirely *endogenous* to the economic process. Davis (2003, 2004) has recently taken the critique further, contending that personal identities are, in fact, realised through the creation and maintenance of social identifications (Davis, 2004, p.22). These arguments incorporate the time dimension, a factor which has so far been largely ignored². In what follows, I attempt to uncover the economic relevance of both situated and long-term processes through which personal and social identities meet.

FINE'S CRITIQUE OF UTILITARIAN VIEWS OF SOCIAL CAPITAL: BECKER VERSUS SEN

As Fine (1998, 2010) has steadily argued, it seems that most theorists of social forms of 'capital' in economics—at least those on the utilitarian side—treat the social as a mere appendage to fixed economic transactions between maximising individuals. Indeed, far from drawing from the long history of insights and analytical tools established by other social scientists (Fine, 1998, p.50), dominant views of social capital in economics, such as that upheld by Nobel Prize winning economist, Gary Becker, ignore all motivations for socio-economic behaviour that stray from the realm of self-interest. Moreover, formal models that aim to describe the relation between economics and society perpetuate their own existence by ensuring a kind of bounded and universal consistency. Being politically-oriented, they establish normative frameworks with real-life implications.

One extremely utilitarian account of social capital, highly criticised by Fine (1998, p.50) and others (Bourdieu, 2005)

is Gary Becker's approach, which one might see as an extension of his human capital theory and the 'new household economics'. While Becker's work on the various humanised 'capitals' may be the apex of economic abstraction, it is relevant for our purpose because Becker himself spearheaded the general shift in economics away from the purely economic domain and towards more non-economic or social domains (Fine, 1998, p.50; though arguably this shift is more towards social and neuro-psychology than sociology or anthropology).

In contrast to Sen's (1977, 2002) theory of 'commitment', to which we shall soon return, Becker sees no instances where 'higher-order [or "meta"; Sen, 1977] rankings of economic decisionmaking are either necessary or useful in understanding behaviour, since ethics and culture affect behaviour in the same general way as do other determinants of utility and preferences' (Becker 1996, p.18; cited by Fine, 1998, p.58). In this view, maximising individual levels of consumption—whether in the form of financial capital or commodities—is the sole motivation for economic decision making. Social motivations which may not depend on optimising personal consumption are left out. In Sen's terms,

A person is given *one* preference ordering [that of maximizing his self-interest], and as and when the need arises this is supposed to reflect his interests, represent his welfare, summarise his idea of what should be done, and describe his actual choices and behaviour. Can one preference ordering do all these things? ... The *purely* economic man is indeed close to being a social moron. (Sen, 1977, pp.335–336)

In addition to treating the universal individual and his social context as exogenous to the economic process, Becker draws a

parallel between 'stocks' of social capital and all other forms of physical and economic capital. Indeed, as Fine (1998, p.58) argues, Becker treats social capital in the same way as any other tangible commodity to be added and subtracted to one's personal assets, based on his or her preferences. In terms of the Caribbean food system, this means that forms of physical capital such as land and machinery are placed in the same light as forms of social capital such as agrobusiness skills and connections, or indeed, work motivation.

If all social and economic forms are treated equally as capital transacted between individuals, however, then it is just one more logical step to reason that persons with claims to social capital start on a level playing ground, competing in *synchronic*, horizontal networks that extend throughout space, as the idea of a net would imply. Imbalances of power hindering local and regional food security, *which have developed over time*, then become irrelevant to socio-economic analysis.

Confining the model to economic valuations also leaves unearthed ecological considerations. Indeed, the constant degradation and down-grading of prime agricultural land to residential or industrial districts in places like Trinidad is a trend beset by the very motivations this kind of economic analysis encourages. Such exclusions are not only matters of epistemology, but also of hegemony.

The issue of most concern with universalising concepts such as social capital is not that they are based on a single 'preference ordering' (Sen, 1977, pp.335–336): the maximisation of personal welfare—in a neoliberal world, this is certainly the primary motivation for many exchanges, social or otherwise—it is rather that they place *all*

social transactions into this light, relegating other relations among humans and between humans and things (i.e., environments) to the realm of irrelevant, immeasurable darkness. Such perspectives not only obscure political economic, ecological and social realities embedded in long-term social relations—consider the constant ideological and political struggle between agricultural productivism and globally uneven terms of trade—but also rest on the imposing ground of prescriptive model making. In time, and with paradigmatic and authoritative rigor, the theoretical model of reality becomes a substantive model or blueprint for reality (Geertz, 1973, p.93).

In Callon and Latour's (1981) terms, formal models in economics become 'macro-actors' that over time, gain authority to translate reality for 'micro-actors'. The dominant account is then reified to the point that 'micro-actors' (i.e., small farmers) sometimes lose the ability to determine and decide upon alternative paths of action:

An actor says what I want, what I know, what I can do, marks out what is possible and what is impossible, what is social and what is technical ... How could I possibly resist when ... that is the correct translation of my unformulated wishes? (Callon and Latour, 1981, p.288)

There are, as always, exceptions to the rule. One is the perspective of Nobel Prize winning economist, Amartya Sen, on the interface between society and economics, which draws from Bernard Williams's work on the inseparability of personal from social identities (Davis, 2004, pp.20–21). In a general attack on utilitarianism, Williams (1973) writes of collective values that override self-interest in philosophical terms. Sen uses similar ideas for economics, redirecting formal analyses of economic decision

making to wider considerations of the decision makers' social world. Both theorists argue that rules and norms for social identification have an 'intrinsic, non-instrumental value' (Davis, 2004, p.20), which provides the base on which personal identities are built. In practical terms, this means that a farmer's decision to, say, sell his produce to a particular vendor, may be based more on a shared identity (i.e., familial relations) than the farmer's desire to maximise his profit. I will return to similar examples later in the context of rural work and exchange in Cuba.

Instead of starting from the premise that the maximising individual (and long-term social relations) may be treated as independent variables, exogenous to the formal model (Davis, 2004), Sen takes an individual's 'sense of commitment to some particular group, say to the neighbourhood or to the social class to which he belongs' (Sen, 1977, p.337) as his starting point. His model 'explain[s] the personal identity of individual economic agents relationally, or through their interactions with others' (Davis, 2004, p.23, emphasis in the original). Sen's nuanced treatment of the embeddedness (Dumont, 1980 [1966]) of economics in society, which most likely draws from the work of Polanyi (1957 [1944]), opens the way to a more situated model of and for social capital the relations between society and economics.

COMMITMENT, IDENTITY- FORMATION AND RURAL WORK AND EXCHANGE IN CUBA: TOWARDS A NEW PARADIGM OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

Sen's idea of commitment and related analyses of identity formation may fortify the oft-unstable bridge linking formal economic thought to more qualitative fields such as anthropology. And anthropology,

in particular, has much to offer as it aims to link theory to ethnographic and historical contexts, revealing how shared values become socially and, thus, personally important through long-term social processes. If one draws from anthropology to explain real-life economic decision making, the implications of non-instrumental, transcendental values (Dumont, 1980 [1966]; whether normative or not) residing above individuals become clear.

Not surprisingly (given the persistence of Cold War dichotomies), the communist government's normative view of the interface between economics and society inverts the dominant economists' version of social capital, prioritising collective duty over personal motivation. The ideological framework that legitimises the communist system in Cuba—with all its historical and emotional symbols—has, to use the neoliberal economist's term, 'trickled-down' somewhat, affecting economic transactions on the ground. Thus Che Guevara's asceticism and Fidel Castro's idea of dedication through work and self-sacrifice have, with the passing of time, really influenced the way Cuban people make economic choices. Indeed, as argued elsewhere (Wilson, 2009, 2010), overarching (and often enforced) values such as the defence of collective needs over monetary rewards complicate the idea that social networks in Cuba are based on personal motivations alone (for a related analysis, see Pertierra, 2007).

In rural Cuba, where the author conducted ethnographic fieldwork from 2005 to 2007, the food system is thus linked not only to a global market driven by individual preferences and rules of supply and demand—take U.S. markets for basic foods, for example, which contribute to a significant percentage of dietary intake

on the island—but also to a national value system: the product of Cuba's particular political and intellectual history. Indeed, while Cubans have partly incorporated the consumerist culture of their northern neighbour, they are also influenced by ideas that have shaped Cuban society over time.

One way to demonstrate this point is to consider work motivation in the Cuban agricultural sector. While economists such as Becker would make a direct link between work motivation in labour-intensive activities such as agriculture, on one hand, and individual remuneration, on the other I suggest that such factors only tell part of the story. Becker comments specifically on communist forms of economic organisation, claiming that 'every communist regime, regardless of culture, failed to achieve any lasting reorientation. Since pay was not sensitive to how hard people worked, they invariably chose to work little, no matter what culture' (Becker, 1996, p.17, cited in Fine, 1998, p.68). The remaining part of this paper disputes this claim with ethnographic data that brings Sen's idea of commitment into the analytical toolkit.

Before this, however, it is important to point out that Cubans do not always want to pursue their own self interest. To be sure, wages in Cuba are very low given the Cuban government's skewed policies of remuneration in a dual economy, and agricultural workers often show their sentiments with their feet. However, Cubans (like most other people) have 'multiple, conflicting social identifications' (Davis, 2004, p.14, in reference to Folbre, 1994), only some of which conform to the idea of the individual maximising his personal benefits. Thus, while some motivations for economic behaviour in Cuba reflect the premise that social

networking maximises the satisfaction of individual interests (which, according to the dominant paradigm, increases the 'growth' of national economies), the author has also witnessed economic exchanges motivated by personal commitments to people and nation (and by extension, land). These kinds of transactions cannot be explained by psychological, neurological or 'natural' factors of homogenous individuals; rather, they must be treated as social events or performances, enacted for *particular* audiences and based on *particular* social rules for economic behaviour.

A convenient place to start is the normative view of work in Cuba. With the slogan 'from each according to his needs, to each according to his ability,' the official account of work is tied to social values, one of which is commitment to the Cuban nation. As in other post-Soviet places, work in Cuba has a kind of 'transactional value' (Humphrey, 1998, p.306), which opens up opportunities for benefits, such as land acquisition. One of the most dedicated farmers, Eduardo, had volunteered for the construction brigades of the 1970s and 1980s and helped to build many of the houses presently resided in by agronomists from the nearby university. Eduardo's efforts certainly helped his chances of obtaining land during the most recent land reforms of the past two decades, as well as support (*apoyo*) from the university, such as access to information and bio-inputs.

But it was not just communist norms that prompted Eduardo and his family to prefer social over monetary transactions. His wife, Mariela, made this aspect of their farming business most clear when she expressed her anger with a woman who had come to the house to buy produce. While the woman who had visited 'could have' brought milk from her family's goat as a 'gift' to Eduardo's

family, which would have been exchanged for produce, the woman was 'stupid' since she only brought money. Mariela stressed that they always preferred to help others with what they produced and were happy when people brought items of use to the family. In her terms 'it is not money, it is the feeling one gets knowing you are helping someone.' She concluded her complaint about the woman on a metaphorical note, 'One hand washes the other, but the two together can wash the face'.

Though Eduardo did engage in market transactions in selling produce to visitors, like his wife he preferred personalised exchanges—usually in kind—conducted on his farm to monetary exchanges. He claimed that his farm was more successful because of these exchange relationships, which combined market and non-market/barter transactions. One example that stands out is the relationship between Eduardo and one of his buyers of mint. In exchange for the latter's continued business, Eduardo proudly told that he 'controlled' the mint-buyer's *mujer* or, as Trinidadians would say, his 'outside woman'. He made me understand that the mint-buyer had several *mujeres*, and that in order to keep this secret, his wife would need to be 'controlled' by invitations to the farm or other distractions.

Along with personalised exchanges based on long-term commitments, more extensive forms of social commitment came into play. For instance, Eduardo's position of 'excellent' in the tier system of the state-sponsored Urban Agriculture Programme (UAP) was clearly an important step towards his personal access to inputs and knowledge, as well as to retaining his land according to the rules of the Cuban state. But his positioning within the UAP was also framed in social terms. Eduardo proudly told me that he was the one that 'all of the people in Cuba

can go to for agroecological knowledge. ... Everyone in Cuba has access to my number. They call me, and I give them information, based on what I have learnt here [on my farm].’ He and his family clearly felt a sense of pride and prestige in their work.

I have the best tasting produce in all of Cuba. It’s all organic. It takes more work, but I currently I get the same price as everyone else. I don’t mind working hard because my produce is healthier for my family and for my customers. I also like making my farm beautiful.

In contrast to the assumption that workers only work for monetary remuneration, the example of Eduardo shows that work may also be prompted by personal attachments to land and community. Moreover, While most economists would argue that work done in the home (classified as non-market) offers fewer opportunities for national growth and ‘development’ than work done in the (legal) labour market (Folbre and Nelson, 2000, p.129), a *qualitative* distinction must be made between, for example, cooking in the household and manufacturing industrial foods in the factory (or factory farm). While the first involves *established* social relations between members of the household and the ‘worker’ (e.g., the housewife) the second involves mostly *arbitrary* relations between boss and ‘labourer’. Thus, while work in the household involves emotional commitments to family members (i.e., a Cuban woman puts ‘love’ into her meals)³ or indeed, to the entire community (i.e., Eduardo) that in the factory may or may not be based on social commitments.

The contrast between household and factory reveals the distinction between the idea of the labourer as a mere cog in the developmental apparatus and the mother, father or child who puts in time for the betterment of his or her family members. Margaret Jane Radin illustrates this difference by

designating ‘work’ as a special category, as opposed to commodified labour:

It is possible to think of work as always containing a non-commodified human element ... Workers make money but are also at the same time givers. Money does not fully motivate them to work, nor does it exhaust the value of their activity. Work is understood not as separate from life and self, but rather as part of the worker, and indeed constitutive of her. Nor is work understood as separate from relations with other people. (Folbre and Nelson, 2000, p.132)

As with the rewards reaped for household work (i.e., well-fed children), the benefits from economic activities based on long-term commitments to people and place are not always commensurable with monetary or capital returns, lying as they do within the domain of economic ‘externalities’ such as the environment or collective well being. Moreover, I have argued that the very act of equating economic value with all social values has real-life consequences, as “rich” markets embedded in local communities’ shift to “thinner,” more impersonal’ interactions (Folbre and Nelson, 2000, p.137). If fields such as sociology and anthropology are to truly influence economics and ‘development,’ it must be understood that market values do not and cannot entirely replace the *who*, the *what* and the *where* of long-term socio-economic processes.

CONCLUSION

So what does all this mean for the use of social capital to ensure food security in the Caribbean? To start with, it means that the drive to do agricultural work—even in non-communist societies—is not always based on economic motivations alone, especially for people who have developed a sense of commitment to land and community. It also means that the dominant idea of social

capital may hinder rather than help our understanding of how such social processes work on the ground.

But of course, just as Putnam (2000) cannot re-create the early era of American civic society, neither can we re-order the structure of Caribbean history, characterised as it is by 'reconstituted' peasants (Mintz, 1985) who may associate agricultural work and local produce with a fractured colonial past. At present, people are trying to re-link Caribbean people and places by promoting regional identity through economic unity. I have tried, however, to show that identification processes are complex and situated, and so economic unification can never mean total social unification.

Given the historical and hegemonic shifts away from agriculture and towards 'modern' industry, it is hard to know how one may begin to re-establish commitment as a basis for economic activity within the food system. First, we must work to prevent cases like the closure of Caroni (1975) Ltd⁴.—where farmers and local consumers alike had already established commitments to place and community—to recur. Indeed, we must recognize the role of commitment in the Caribbean food system—from the social and ecological relations a farmer has to his land and community to the way that people value commodities. To do so, we may, for example, encourage those efforts that are already being done in educating the public about local foods and their uses.

If we are to re-align the social, environmental and political economic aspects of land, people and production in the Caribbean, a revolution in paradigms is surely needed. Indeed, as I have tried to show in this paper, models for society that rely primarily on maximising motivations are as inadequate as they are unjust.

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NOTES

- ¹ The second I have dealt with in the introduction to Wilson 2010.
- ² Though see Parry and Bloch, 1989.
- ³ When serving any meal, my humble Cuban 'mother' would always say 'it is not the best meal, but it is made with love'.
- ⁴ Caroni (1975) Ltd. was a statutory company in Trinidad, which provided a market for small-scale sugarcane growers. After the closure of the company in 2007, these small farmers were re-located from their families' lands, mostly to industrial areas.