Democratizing Social Capital: In Pursuit of Liberal Egalitarianism

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I. Introduction

In a provocative essay on the state, civil society and equality, Michael Walzer concludes his discussion by drawing a distinction between classical liberalism and what he calls "liberal egalitarianism."[1] Whereas the former characteristically views the organized politics of the state as an intrusive force from which individuals and their associations need to be protected, liberal egalitarians hold that an egalitarian civil society is dependent upon state action for three fundamental reasons:

> . . . first, because the state is necessary to enforce the norms of civility and regulate the conflicts that arise within civil society; second, because the state is necessary to remedy the inequalities produced by the associational strength of different groups . . . and third, because the state is necessary to set limits on the forms of inequality that arise within the different associations.[2]

In this essay, we propose to give theoretical clarification and empirical weight to the first and second of these suggestive claims by developing them in the context of contemporary social capital theory. Most generally, we want to extend and apply Walzer's core assumption—namely, that the state, for all its putative faults, is nevertheless an indispensable mechanism of the de-stratification of civil associations. Put somewhat differently, while much recent research in social capital theory has emphasized the power of civil associations and groups to democratize society, we hold, conversely, that it is such associations and groups that, more often than not, are in need of democratization in the form of state actions aimed at the vertical recomposition and redistribution of their social resources. Of course we do not intend to minimize the democratic *potential* of certain normatively exceptional reflexive associational forms—what we shall call "mediating groups" in what follows. But we do share with Walzer the basic intuition that by and large civil society profoundly "reflects and is likely to reinforce and augment the effects of inequality."[3]

We begin our analysis with a summary of current theories of social capital (section II). We then go on to highlight what we take to be the central failings of the dominant sense of social capital in contemporary democratic political theory,

as well as argue for a distinction between "horizontal social capital" and "vertical social capital" that more adequately explains the normative potential of social capital within civil society formations (section III). From there we deploy our account of social capital in a brief case study of social capital formation in the urban milieu, where high degrees of associational inequality not only express socioeconomic, cultural, and ethnoracial stratification, but all too often serve to further and deepen such hierarchical divisions (section IV). We close with an attempt to make explicit the broader implications of our argument for pursuing liberal egalitarianism by emphasizing the dialectical relationship between social capital-generating groups and associations and state action (section V).

II. What Is Social Capital?

For all their diverse theoretical origins and empirical applications, it is possible to identify three prevalent strands in contemporary work in social capital theory.[4] First, there is an economic or *rational* strand of social capital, found most notably in the rational choice theory of Gary Becker and James Coleman, and central to policy-oriented theories of growth and economic development such as those pursued at the World Bank.[5] Second, there is a critical or *Marxist* strand of social capital analysis, exemplified by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, in which theories of social groups, power, and class conflict are applied in the empirical study of cultural practices.[6] Third, there is a political or *democratic* strand of social capital, developed most prominently by Robert Putnam, which is one of the hallmarks of contemporary neo-Tocquevillean political science and democratic theories of associations.[7] In this section we summarize the main features of the first two strands, and, in light of its normative assumptions and prominence in contemporary political theory, give greater attention to the third.

Central to the economic or rational strand in contemporary social capital theory is the rational choice conception of the human actor as an essentially self-interested individual whose behavior, guided by instrumental reason, always takes the form of strategic action. Gary Becker calls this the "rationality assumption" upon which a rational choice theory of action is based.[8] In this conception of action, the "utility function," as Becker describes it, serves to minimize transaction costs and maximize outcomes of individual actors as they pursue the realization of their self-interests.[9] Such minimizing and maximizing behavior is taken to be the fundamental and governing aspect of *all* human action.[10] Human action, it is assumed, is essentially economic action.[11] Similarly, James Coleman's influential rational choice sociology of action begins with universal assumptions about human beings as radically individualistic utility-maximizing reasoners. In his *Foundations of Social Theory*, Coleman adheres to a rational conception of action in which all types of action are subsumed under "a single purpose—to increase the actor's realization of interests."[12]

Viewed from within the framework of the rational choice conception of action, social capital amounts to the organized connections and weak (i.e.,

strategic) ties between and among individuals that have functional utility. Or, in Coleman's parsimonious definition, social capital consists of "some aspect of a social structure" and it facilitates "certain actions of individuals who are within the structure."[13] Here social capital is merely one of many functional resources, including physical and human capital, needed to make possible the efficient realization of individual and mutually beneficial ends. It is a resource or store of functional connections and strategic ties upon which individuals may draw to optimize their interests and behaviors to achieve ends difficult, if not impossible, to attain in the absence of such associative connections and ties.

The second strand in social capital theory is exemplified in the work of Pierre Bourdieu. In many ways, Bourdieu's sociology presents a unique alternative to the rational strand in contemporary social capital theory. Throughout his work Bourdieu has persistently rejected the rational choice reduction of human action to behavioral aggregations of rational individuals whose choices are governed only by a utility function.[14] For Bourdieu, all human action is holistically related to a background or "habitus." A habitus is a shared set of durable dispositions, perceptive schemes, and ingrained orientations that functions as the structuring structure for the production and reproduction of human action.[15] Thus, for Bourdieu, associations—Bourdieu calls them social groups—do not come about simply through the voluntary cooperative actions of individuals who have rightly understood and sought to maximize their self-interest. Rather, social groups are for Bourdieu classes in a neo-Marxist sense. That is to say that for Bourdieu social groups are not, as Marx maintained, actual classes mobilized explicitly for the common purpose of dominating or confronting an opposing class. Instead, social groups are implicit or probable classes in the sense that their existence, identity, and membership are determined by *non-voluntary predispositions*.[16] Consequently, social capital in this strand is a socioculturally shared marker or "credit."[17] Such a credit is profoundly informed by pre-reflective, stratifying background norms of consumption that, for example, predispose some actors to "choose" to drink beer instead of wine, or to "join" rugby clubs rather than bird-watching societies.[18]

In both its conception of human action and sense of the effects of social capital, the political or democratic strand in contemporary social capital theory runs largely counter to the rationalist and Marxist strands. Indeed, where the rational strand exclusively emphasizes the utility-maximizing potential of the action-facilitating resource of social capital, and where the Marxist strand characterizes social capital as a predispositional marker of social identity and group membership, the political or democratic strand in contemporary social capital theory has followed Tocqueville in arguing for a *causal* link between networks of trust and social norms and the practical realization of the normative ideals of democracy. This strand in social capital theory, popularized by Robert Putnam, takes as its starting point neither the dissociated utility-maximizing individual of rational choice theory nor the embeddedness of actors in pre-reflective consumption norms of Marxism. Instead, it draws on a contrasting image of the voluntarily

associated *citoyen* of the nineteenth-century American townships presented by Tocqueville.

In fact, in the democratic strand of social capital theory, associated actors are not rationally organized individual atoms or merely stratifyingly habituated group members. Rather, they are normative social facts that cultivate what Tocqueville described as the "habits of acting together in the affairs of daily life" upon which democratic society depends.[19] On this account, normatively thick forms of inter-subjective obligations—"mores" in Tocqueville's sense—are acquired and rein-forced in the day-to-day working together and associating with others.[20] The mastering of "the technique of association"[21] was for Tocqueville and remains for Putnam foundational for democracy in America. Indeed, for Tocqueville and neo-Tocquevillean political theorists such as Putnam, everyday associations are the more-laden wellsprings of democratic norms and habits. They are the source of both bridging structures (which facilitate weak strategic ties among utility-maximizers) and, most crucially, bonding obligations (which establish strong moral ties among communities of citizens).

Thus, informed by its normative assumptions about the social facts of asso-ciations, the democratic strand in contemporary social capital theory conceives of social capital as the communal inventory of "generalized trust," mutual obliga-tions, and shared cooperative attitudes that, to borrow Putnam's phrase, "make democracy work." In fact, while Putnam occasionally acknowledges the "dark side" of social capital—closed networks and the cultivation of undemocratic "mores"—on balance he argues that social capital enables the democratic resolu-tion of collective action problems (e.g., prisoner's dilemmas and free-rider prob-lems), "greases the wheels that allow communities to advance smoothly," and develops and maintains "character traits that are good for the rest of society."[22] Indeed, in the democratic strand of social capital theory, the explicitly normative effects of associational life are considered so important for democratic existence that a numerical decrease in associational memberships is thought to imperil democracy. Put in the metaphoric terms of Putnam, in a society where social capital has eroded—where, that is, individuals are increasingly "bowling alone"— democracy is inevitably in decline and community is in need of revival. Putnam has sought to deploy precisely this causal argument about the democratic effects of social capital in his empirical studies of Italy and the United States, and in his more recent explicit appeals to the importance of "restoring" community for American democracy.[23]

III. A Critique of the Democratic Theory of Social Capital

One of the core problems with the democratic strand in contemporary social capital theory is what one might call *moral inflationism*. In Putnam most espe-cially, a normatively overloaded conception of the nature of associations and social groups leads to universalizing claims about the causal, democratically salutary, effects of such entities. Far from reducing social norms to rational norms,

as one finds in the work of Coleman and Becker, the democratic strand in social capital theory errs in the other direction. It over-inflates the putative moral functions of social capital into association and group-transcending democratic ideals. To be sure, associations such as bowling teams and bird-watching clubs, may not, as Amitai Etzioni has argued, be "morally trivial."[24] But neither can their normative force be puffed up as inherently democratic or ineluctably democratizing.[25] The resolution of collective action problems and the promotion of "character traits" that may take place in many associations and social groups do not in any necessary way entail the fostering of democratic mores among individual association members or between associations and social groups.[26]

A related and equally troubling difficulty emerges as a result of the democratic strand's heavy reliance on metaphors of "bonding," "bridging," and conceptions of community and a "generalized other" in its macro-level explanations of the democratic functions of social capital. Such vague metaphors simplify the multilayered nature of, and gloss over the deep inequalities and conflicts inherent in, modern civil societies in ways both empirically reductive and normatively problematic. Here we find Bourdieu's account of social capital especially instructive. For Bourdieu, social capital is, as summarized previously, a socially shared "credit." Such a credit does indeed facilitate a certain kind of *intra-group* identification, trust, and normativity: mutual recognition, solidarity, and obligations between and among individual group members. Yet it equally promotes *inter-group* distrust and struggles: antagonisms and conflicts between and among groups whose networks of trust and social norms are characteristically dependent upon the suspicion, misrecognition, or exclusion of others' networks and norms.

What the democratic strand in social capital theory fails to incorporate into its analysis, that is to say, is the Bourdieuean insight that social capital is profoundly embedded in the hierarchies of civil society and thus is a mechanism of the (re)production of various forms of inequality. Indeed, most "bridging" and "bonding" forms of social capital establish relations to others and associations *within* the same horizon or social stratum. Put simply, the bridging functions of social capital characteristically lead individuals to "bond" with and "trust" others more or less like themselves. Likewise, the "bonding" functions of social capital create *internal* bridges within the existing strata of civil society.

In light of Bourdieu then, and consistent with Walzer's concern for how civil society tends to reinforce and augment inequality, we want to argue that the very nature and functioning of social capital need to be reconsidered in more normatively differentiated ways. Social capital is characteristically a highly group-specific, socioculturally and economically context-dependent form of capital circulated and deployed by associations and social groups in their everyday struggles for control over the consumption and distribution of limited economic, social, and cultural resources. Theories of social capital must capture the ways in which a given store of social capital available to, and appropriated by, a particular association or group belongs to a peculiarly restricted economy. For the networks

that comprise the value of social capital are by and large accessible only to those who already occupy (as formal or informal members) or have access to the stratum (share the same habitus) in which specific trust networks or group norms exist. To provide a ready example: in the elite preparatory school settings of the United States, students acquire the social capital needed to gain admission to and successfully navigate the sociocultural arena of Ivy League colleges and universities, where they form associations and join clubs with others who may come from different geographic places but for the most part share the same social stratum or habitus. These associational networks and group-dependent "credits" in turn facilitate and further extend lateral movement across some of America's highest level social (and economic and political) strata upon matriculation. Ivy League sport clubs, for example, provide members with a highly specific and powerful kind of social network quite different from the social network available to members of, say, an urban boxing club. The general point to be made here is that the resource of social capital is for the most part only within the reach of those who occupy or already have gained entry to the specific level in which it exists and circulates. Put simply, the communal or "generalized other" to which Putnam refers is not *vertically generalizable*.

Although the common denominator in all three strands of social capital theory is that social capital is ultimately a cooperation-fostering, action-facilitating resource, the political strand of social capital theory overdraws, as we have seen, the extent to which robust democratic action is enabled by such a resource. By contrast, we suggest that in stratified civil societies the democratic normativity and potential of this resource cannot be merely assumed or simply attributed to the composition of associational life or effects of membership in most social groups. We want to argue that such assumptions and attributions confound the nature and effects of what are in fact two distinct types of social capital. These are "horizontal social capital" and "vertical social capital":

- *Horizontal social capital* is resources (networks of trust and social norms) that are accessible and appropriable *within* a specific socioeconomic, cultural, and/or ethnoracial stratum—this is social capital in its most basic and commonplace civil society form.
- *Vertical social capital* is resources (networks of trust and social norms) that are accessible and appropriable *between and among* socioeconomic, cultural, and/or ethnoracial strata—this is social capital in its redistributed and potentially "democratizing" form.[27]

It is in fact the *vertical* accessibility and appropriability of social capital that is decisive for the creation of a democratically egalitarian society. In direct contrast to Putnam, then, whose earlier work cursorily views horizontal ties as democratically productive and vertical ties as encouraging state dependency and passive citizenry, we are arguing that while horizontal ties may promote community or sense of a "generalized other" throughout a particular socioeconomic,

cultural, and/or ethnoracial stratum, such ties cannot be relied upon to generate linkages that traverse those strata in ways needed to foster equality within civil society.[28]

Perhaps another way to make explicit the core of our argument here is to connect the language of social capital theory to Margaret Gilbert's philosophical conception of social groups as "plural subject phenomena."[29] For Gilbert, what make human groups social are precisely the mental states of individuals, and the mutual recognition and interlocking relations and obligations of those mental states. From this perspective, social groups are composed of individuals who have a special mental tie, a consciousness of a unity—or what one might call cognitive capital. The ubiquity and importance of the cognitive resource of plural subject phenomena is exemplified in the everyday usage of the English pronoun "we," which expresses not merely internalized forces or externalized actions but rather *how* individual members of social groups conceive of themselves as genuine *social* units. Indeed, Gilbert maintains that the core feature of plural subject phenomena—a sense of the normative unity of "we"—is the building block of the social unit. In the context of our analysis of social capital, we would agree, but also insist that the Gilbertian sense of "we" (like most senses of "we") is characteristically horizontal and hierarchical, designating not simply in-group mental attributions and ties but also out-group distinctions and divisions (a sense of "they").[30] Consequently, while plural subject phenomena may in fact be the building blocks of social units, on our account it is nevertheless the verticalization of plural subject phenomena that establishes the social building blocks of democracy.

In short, we are arguing that social groups, informal and formal associations—the plural subject phenomena that populate contemporary civil societies—typically (re)produce horizontal social capital. Of course, democracies also need the critical consciousness-raising power of certain associational formations within civil society. But contra Putnam, the kind of critical consciousness-raising power we have in mind has its origins not in the stratified horizontal social capital typically (re)produced by civil society groups and associations such as sport and leisure clubs. Rather, the democratic potential of civil society resides in the initiatives of normatively *atypical* groups and associations to verticalize stores of social capital *from within*, and a willingness to deploy that unique form of capital in ways that elicit state actions that further redistribute and democratize access to social, economic, and human capital. We shall characterize such groups and associations in what follows as "mediating groups."[31] What makes groups "mediating," as we shall try to show directly, is that they reflexively crisscross socioeconomic, cultural (and at times even ethnoracial) strata to expand members' normative conceptions of "we" and at the same time critically engage the larger mechanisms of the state. It is in an attempt to define and explain the complex internal dynamics and critical external functions of mediating groups in stratified civil societies that we now turn to our brief case study of social capital formation in the urban milieu. This case will make explicit the normative uniqueness of mediating groups, as well as suggest why

and how the democratic potential of such groups is dialectically dependent on the action of the state for its full realization.

IV. Social Capital in the Urban Milieu

The Metropolitan Organization for Racial and Economic Equity (MORE2) is an emergent interfaith coalition of twelve congregations in the Kansas City, Missouri metro area. In this section we present MORE2 as illustrative of how a mediating group forms and deploys vertical social capital in a stratified urban social location. MORE2 is interesting in several respects, but for the purposes of this section we focus on the internal dynamics and external politics of the coalition. The internal dynamics of a mediating group such as MORE2 are quite complex. With a membership that crisscrosses ethnoracial, class, and religious strata, MORE2's members do not readily constitute a "we." On the contrary, the relative cohesion and mobilization of the coalition is dependent upon generating a sense of "we" that does not draw on familiar but stratifying doctrinal, ethnoracial, or class norms.

The normative challenge posed by the coalition's deep diversity emerged early on. Individuals in MORE2 came from traditional, conservative Christian congregations as well as more theologically liberal congregations and denominations in the Kansas City metropolitan area. They were also African Americans, White Americans, Latino Americans, gay, lesbian, heterosexual, and so on. At early organizational meetings, it was apparent that group-specific senses of identity, mutual trust, respect, and tolerance posed serious obstacles to individual members' abilities to understand and work with one another as a coalition. This was especially evident on issues of sexual and theological orientation. On the one side, many gay and lesbian participants and their allies from a local Unitarian Universalist congregation wondered how they could work with people from more theologically and politically conservative congregations that had recently supported a Missouri Constitutional amendment defining marriage exclusively as a heterosexual union. On the other side, individuals from more culturally and politically conservative congregations were puzzled by the very presence of Unitarian Universalists in what was from their perspective a faith-based coalition.

Thus, it became clear that internal issues of (dis)trust and (mis)recognition among MORE2 members had to be addressed if the coalition was to cohere and effectively direct its resources in the Kansas City metropolitan area. In a highly reflexive way, individual members of MORE2 addressed such issues by deliberatively scrutinizing not only their own and others' points of view, but also the diverse strata that informed such viewpoints. In this way, vertical social capital was generated by regular meetings, extended dialogues, and ongoing attempts at cooperation up and down some of the strata of urban civil society. And indeed, over time, the coalition deliberatively resolved the collective action problems posed by conflicting intra-group norms and trust among its members. What such a preliminary deliberative resolution suggests is that horizontal social capital has

no necessary *a priori* relation to mutual recognition, social cooperation, and joint action. Moreover, it also demonstrates how vertical social capital can *result from* the normatively disembedding effects of individuals' reflexive attempts to criss-cross socioeconomic, cultural, and ethnoracial strata.[32]

The internal dynamics of MORE2, where problems of horizontal social capital were deliberatively negotiated and vertical social capital generated, also serve as a useful normative counterweight to the democratic strand's confusing metaphors of "bridging" and "bonding" social capital. For while Putnam maintains that religious communities promote "bonding" social capital among members and insiders, in this case it is evident that interfaith coalitions are better able to foster the kind of vertical social capital that links insiders and outsiders from various socioeconomic and enthoracial strata. For taken in isolation, the "we" of religious communities is most likely to recirculate social capital among insiders and members (i.e., produce and preserve horizontal social capital).[33] By contrast, coalitional mediating groups like MORE2 are able to disperse social capital more broadly among members of religious communities who inhabit diverse social strata (i.e., produce and circulate vertical social capital).

To be sure, the challenges facing MORE2 went beyond the normative task of creating vertical social capital within its membership. Indeed, once normatively verticalized, the central problem confronting the coalition was how to connect associations and group members from different and unequal socioeconomic, ethnoracial strata to existing state institutions and market mechanisms. The problem, that is to say, was how to mobilize MORE2's newly generated stores of vertical social capital to effect change in the Kansas City urban milieu.

MORE2 addressed such external objectives by identifying its top three political priorities. In May 2005, it held a meeting at which members debated the merits of various local issues drawn from a list of ten issues that were nominated by member congregations prior to the meeting. They then deliberated and voted to determine the top three issues to which they would commit their collective action resources. These were: living wage jobs, education, and youth in poverty. Subsequently, subgroups were formed and charged with developing action plans for each area.

This process of identifying shared external goals was important for two reasons. First, rather than specific congregation leaders giving MORE2 members a predetermined set of objectives, it allowed individual members of the coalition to participate in identifying and prioritizing goals. This in turn helped to cement coalitional cohesion and shared commitments. Second, because shared goals were determined amid high levels of diversity, differences that might otherwise have divided individuals had to be negotiated through the prism of shared interests and common goals that cut across strata-specific perspectives. In this way, reflexive deliberative processes not only created additional vertical social capital among coalition members, but also played a crucial role in explicitly directing such capital toward external political objectives.[34]

Of course such reflexive processes were a delicate enterprise, since often articulating common goals and interests came at the expense of giving deeper recognition to the unique identities and agendas of specific groups or strata within MORE2. Still, despite the group's fragile composition, in the summer of 2005 MORE2 managed to create an organization known as the "Jericho Table," whose members were drawn from 39 local organizations, including MORE2, labor unions and businesses, as well as elected officials and agencies at the city and county levels. The Jericho Table set out to ensure that the benefits of a multibillion dollar urban reconstruction and development boom in metropolitan Kansas City were extended beyond the usual range of well-connected (White-American) businesses and contractors. To that end, the Jericho Table offered several proposals, such as "encouraging more companies to establish mentoring programs, improving education in technical and construction fields, and asking churches to adopt policies that ensure adequate representation of minorities and women in the labor force and among contractors on congregational projects."[35] After holding a series of public forums in Kansas City, one major construction company pledged to support plans to mentor and teach women and minority workers as well as to subcontract with ten percent minority and women-owned businesses for the next two years. Another construction company vowed to give priority to subcontractors that hire minority and women workers. And the local AFL-CIO labor union established "Project Prepare" to support education, training, and apprenticeship programs for women and minorities. MORE2 then held follow-up forums to ensure these promises were kept.

In part due to the hiring and contracting goals set by Kansas City public officials with the prompting of MORE2 and the Jericho Table, the City Manager subsequently reported that publicly financed construction projects exceeded the hiring goals targeting women and people of color.[36] Though critical of the city for being slow to release the report, leaders of MORE2 issued a statement recognizing that city officials "came through on their commitment" and called for a meeting with the City Manager to discuss their concerns regarding the construction projects that fell short of the desired hiring and contracting goals.[37]

Admittedly, in many respects MORE2's early initiatives in creating and actively participating in the Jericho Table were minor local efforts. Yet they are no less normatively or empirically compelling for that reason.[38] Indeed, the case is significant because the vertical social capital generated within MORE2 was a necessary condition for a political effort that helped recirculate human capital (training, apprenticeship programs) and economic capital (contracts, jobs) to various individuals and groups that would have been cut out of the network had MORE2 not created the Jericho Table and used its membership to target local government officials and business leaders. Moreover, now that MORE2 and the Jericho Table have leveraged their influence to achieve material results, credibility and trust among coalition members and, more broadly, ties to the resource-poor communities of Kansas City, have been strengthened. Based on such preliminary outcomes, we are able to understand in greater detail how vertical social capital is

generated and deployed by highly reflexive coalitions. Indeed, it was MORE2's reflexive coalitional form and deliberative core that enabled it to create vertical social capital between and among different and unequal groups and socioeconomic and ethnoracial strata, and mobilize that capital in politically specific ways.

At the same time, it must be emphasized that mediating groups such as MORE2 are normatively exceptional and sociologically fragile, and do not and cannot accomplish their egalitarian objectives on their own. Their work is a necessary but not sufficient step in making vertically accessible and fairly redistributing societal resources. What the case of MORE2 suggests is the need for a more normatively robust, differentiated framework in the democratic strand in social capital theory. MORE2 is a normatively atypical association—a critical coalition or deliberatively reflexive mediating group that is created to bring together people and associations from different social strata, to raise public awareness, and to engage in political action directly aimed at influencing state and market institutions. It is a coalition, that is to say, created with the reflexively self-conscious aim of generating and deploying vertical social capital. In fact, it is just this aim that distinguishes mediating groups from other associational forms, such as bridge clubs and bowling teams. Unlike such clubs and teams, which characteristically reflect, replicate and even augment social stratification and inequalities, mediating groups seek to make porous the often rigid hierarchical boundaries that effectively block the generation and circulation of vertical social capital, and to deploy that resource in explicitly political ways. In the face of the deep inequalities that divide civil society, this is no small task. But without the state even the rich democratic endeavors of mediating groups remain episodic and largely inchoate. Indeed, the enduring transformational potential of civil society is co-dependent on state action, as we shall try to highlight in the next section. For it is the power of the state—sovereign parliaments, senates, and city halls—to write legislation, enact policy, and to establish binding decisions that *institutionalize* the vertical accessibility and redistribution of social capital.

V. Social Capital and State Action

Rethinking the theory of social capital in the ways that we have sought to do here not only adds the dimension of vertical appropriability to the explanatory vocabulary of the study of the normative potential of civil society, but also calls our attention to the dialectical entwinement of social capital-generating associations and groups and the actions of the state. For while it is certainly true that, as Walzer rightly points out in the essay we have used to frame our discussion here, "states do not act in egalitarian ways unless they are pressed to do so by mobilizations that can only take place in civil society," it is also the case that "*no significant move toward greater equality has ever been made without state action.*"[39]

This kind of dialectical interdependence of what we have called mediating groups and the state is badly obfuscated in the democratic strand in contemporary

social capital theory, where, as we have seen, the relationship between associations and democracy is often glossed as linear and causal, a kind of "one-way street" in which a robust civil society of associations and groups necessarily has democratically salutary effects on individual members and the larger institutions of government. We argued previously that such a causal argument morally inflates the power of associations and social groups and underdetermines the stratified social geography of contemporary civil societies. In this section we want to show that, at least in the U.S. context, it also demonstrates a kind of historical amnesia. Let us offer three abbreviated examples.[40]

First, by calling for a new Progressive era in the United States, Putnam and American policy-makers who share his view backhandedly acknowledge the crucial role of the state in making social capital vertically accessible and appropriable. While civil associations were no doubt important during the Progressive era in the United States, many changes would simply not have been achieved in that period if its associations had not been augmented by the legislative mechanisms of governing institutions. For it was only through the action of the state that progressive taxation, professionalization of the civil service, regulation of corporate practices, "trust busting" legislation to combat corporate monopolies, and the elimination of child labor were achieved. The point is simply that to the extent that the democratic strand in social capital theory is right to hold up the Progressive era as an historical model, it makes explicit how high levels of social capital are in themselves insufficient. Proactive legislatures and sovereign political institutions are crucial mechanisms for attempting to equalize the empirical conditions of civil society under which social capital can be generated and circulated.[41] This is especially the case in the United States today, where, for example, various forms of stratification have accelerated under the pressures of recent tax cuts, the decline of real wages since the early 1970s, increased income polarization, the resegregation of civil society, and the demise of affirmative action programs.[42]

Second, Putnam's invocation of the "greatest generation," a generation which is said to have created the post–World War II boom of social capital in the United States, and whose passing is seen as the major cause of the decline of social capital in America today, suffers from a similar kind of amnesia. Such nostalgia obscures the fact that many members of the so-called greatest generation benefited from the "helping hand" of the state immediately after World War II. Specifically, the GI Bill forced open the doors of American academia (undergraduate, graduate, and professional schools) to many veterans who would not have had vertical access to higher education in the United States.[43] Once they earned their diplomas, these veterans, newly outfitted with advanced degrees in the humanities, law, medicine, science, and business, gained entry into sociopolitical (and economic) strata that would have otherwise been entirely out of their reach. Extolling the role of America's so-called greatest generation without acknowledging the institutional mechanisms of the state that helped make that generation's "greatness" possible is to mythologize a complex historical process of the state's hand in *institutionalizing* the verticalization of social capital in the United States.

A final example is that of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. Here it was indisputably the work of mediating groups that put the immorality of legalized apartheid ("separate but equal") on the national agenda with consciousness-raising arguments about equality under the law and judging people by the "content of their character" rather than the color of their skin. Such claims, and the forms of direct action—marches, protests, boycotts, and so on—in which they were raised, were an effective counter to the irrationality of *de jure* segregation and racial hatred, and remain historically paradigmatic examples of the power of mediating groups in the United States. However, it is important not to overdraw the transformative power of such groups acting by themselves. Indeed, the tactics employed by coalitional Civil Rights groups were designed to elicit proactive judicial and legislative responses from the federal government on concrete matters of employment, voting, public spaces, housing, and education.[44] Such state action was crucial to the political efficacy of the movement. In the context of the present discussion, one of the lessons to be gleaned from the modest but very real success of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement is not to conflate the consciousness-raising force of mediating groups with the material power of the state. The episodic potential of the former to raise awareness, change minds, and generate a vertical sense of "we" is no substitute for the actual power of the latter to redistribute resources and legislate accessibility over the long term. It was, after all, the mechanisms of the state (legislative, judicial, and ultimately, military force) that were needed to guarantee the porosity and vertical accessibility of America's racially stratified schools, neighborhoods, and places of work.

VI. Conclusion

In this article we have sought to develop an account of social capital, mediating groups, and state action that takes seriously the problems of stratification and inequality in civil societies. Most generally, this account draws its inspiration from Walzer's suggestive formulation of liberal egalitarianism—a formulation that insists on the importance of state action in the creation of an equal and decent society. Central to such an account is the claim that, with the notable exception of vertical social capital-generating groups, the associations that populate civil society tend to (re)produce and deepen inequality. We argued that: (1) the social capital produced in most civil society formations is horizontal; (2) horizontal social capital characteristically reinforces and extends existing relations of stratification; and (3) mediating groups aside, the vast majority of civil society associational forms thus have no necessarily normatively democratic force.

In sum, we sought to show how neo-Tocquevillean accounts of social capital that fail to differentiate adequately between horizontal and vertical social capital and draw a causal arrow between high levels of social capital and robust democratic life are empirically reductive and morally inflated. To be sure, the initiatives of certain kinds of civil associations—what we characterized as mediating groups—are in fact necessary elements in the making of a more egalitarian

society. But their critical work, while necessary, is never sufficient. Realizing liberal egalitarianism in stratified societies requires an ongoing dialectic between mediating groups and state action that conjointly promotes the vertical accessibility and appropriability of societal resources. Under conditions of persistent stratification, the state must also act to provide long-term, institutional guarantees that make accessible and redistribute the resources generated by unequal sociopolitical, economic, and ethnoracial hierarchies. Indeed, in the interest of remedying the inequalities produced by most civil society formations, the state plays an active role in regulating and (re)distributing various forms of capital. Pursuing the project of liberal egalitarianism thus depends upon the actions of mediating groups *and* the state. The prioritization of one over the other undermines the democratic potential of both.

Notes

[1] See Michael Walzer, "Equality and Civil Society," in *Alternative Conceptions of Civil Society*, ed. Simone Chambers and Will Kymlicka (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 34–49. For reasons of space and focus, in what follows we make no attempt to relate this argument more broadly to Walzer's work.

[2] Ibid., 47.

[3] Ibid., 39.

[4] For a comprehensive conceptual history of the origins of social capital theory, see James Farr, "Social Capital: A Conceptual History," *Political Theory* 32, no. 1 (2004): 6–33.

[5] One of the best single-volume collections devoted to elaborating the rational strand in contemporary social capital theory is *Social Capital: A Multifaceted Perspective*, ed. Partha Dasgupta and Ismail Serageldin (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 1999). Contributions of particular relevance here include Solow's notes on social capital and economic performance, Coleman's discussion of social capital and human capital, and Dasgupta's overview of the link between economic progress and social capital.

[6] The defining texts in the Marxist strand in social capital theory remains Pierre Bourdieu's own studies of taste and higher education in France. See especially Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984); *Homo Academicus*, trans. Peter Collier (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988); and *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*, trans. Lauretta C. Clough (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).

[7] The democratic strand in social capital theory, which has its origins in Alexis de Tocqueville, is examined in a comparative perspective in Bob Edwards, Michael W. Foley, and Mario Diani, eds., *Beyond Tocqueville: Civil Society and the Social Capital Debate in Comparative Perspective* (London: University Press of New England, 2001), and is developed most fully by Robert Putnam in "The Prosperous Community: Social Capital and Public Life," *The American Prospect* 13 (Spring 1993): 35–41; "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy* 6, no. 1 (1995): 65–78; and *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

[8] Gary S. Becker, "Interview with Richard Swedberg," in *Economics and Sociology: Redefining Their Boundaries: Conversations with Economists and Sociologists*, ed. Richard Swedberg (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 41.

[9] Gary S. Becker, "The Economic Approach to Human Behavior," in *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 3–14.

[10] Ibid., 5.

[11] Indeed, see ibid., 5–14, where Becker maintains that the "combined assumptions of maximizing behavior, market equilibrium and stable preferences, used relentlessly and unflinchingly . . . provides a valuable unified framework for understanding *all* human behavior."

[12] James Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1990), 32. For a related attempt to situate the model of economic action in social structures, see Mark Granovetter, "Economic Action and Social Structure: The Problem of Embeddedness," *American Journal of Sociology* 91, no. 3 (1985): 481–510.

[13] Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory*, 302.

[14] See especially Pierre Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990); and *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

[15] For a more extensive discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of Bourdieu's account of action, see Joseph D. Lewandowski, "Thematizing Embeddedness: Reflexive Sociology as Interpretation," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 30, no. 1 (2000): 49–66.

[16] On the theoretical and practical existence of groups as "social classes," see Pierre Bourdieu's "What Makes a Social Class? On the Theoretical and Practical Existence of Groups," *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 32, no. 1 (1987): 1–16. For a fine historical account of how classes are made largely independent of the intentions and voluntary associations of those who belong to them, see E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Random House, 1966).

[17] Bourdieu's definition of social capital appears sporadically throughout his work. But it is most concisely formulated in his essay on the forms of capital, where he says that "social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word." See Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 248–49.

[18] In this context, see especially Bourdieu's study of the social character of taste in *Distinction*.

[19] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence (New York: Harper, 1969), 514.

[20] For an attempt to specify what features and types of associations are most likely to produce democratic effects, see Mark E. Warren, *Democracy and Association* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

[21] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 522.

[22] Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 288.

[23] See Robert Putnam, *Better Together: Restoring the American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003).

[24] Amitai Etzioni, "On Social and Moral Revival," *The Journal of Philosophy* 9, no. 3 (2001): 356–71.

[25] On this point, see especially Nancy Rosenblum, *Membership and Morals* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

[26] Timothy McVeigh's membership in the Michigan Militia is one obvious and dramatic example of the undemocratic effects of associational membership. As more than one commentator has remarked, America would have been better off had McVeigh "bowled alone." For an account of the undemocratic consequences of social capital in extremist groups in the U.S. and Eastern European contexts, see Simone Chambers and Jeffrey Kopstein, "Bad Civil Society," *Political Theory* 29, no. 6 (2001): 837–65.

[27] In this regard we share with Foley et al. a general skepticism toward "analyses that lay too much weight on 'civil society' conceived as voluntary associations," as well as a general

definitional sense of social capital as "resources + access." See Foley et al., *Beyond Tocqueville*, 277, 279.

[28] For Putnam's remarks about the democratic importance of horizontal ties, see *Making Democracy Work*, especially chapter 6.

[29] Margaret Gilbert, *On Social Facts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

[30] For a relevant discussion of Gilbert's work on social facts, see Joseph D. Lewandowski, "What Makes a Fact Social? On the Embeddedness of Social Action," *Existentia: An International Journal of Philosophy* 12, no. 3–4 (2002): 281–93.

[31] For a more complete account of "mediating groups," see Gregory W. Streich, "Constructing Multiracial Democracy: To Deliberate or Not to Deliberate?" *Constellations* 9, no. 1 (2002): 127–53.

[32] See Foley et al., *Beyond Tocqueville*, 274, for more on how trust is not a cause of cooperation, but rather an outcome of successful cooperation. Also, see Mark R. Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), chaps. 4–5, for a close examination of the interracial and interdenominational dimensions of several community-based organizations affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation in Texas and Arizona. One activist responded to a question of cross-racial coalition-building stated: "Working together is a necessary step. . . . We need to start working together and *build some trust first*" (Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling*, 154–55, emphasis added).

[33] This is in fact especially the case in the organized religions of the United States, where it is well-known that Sunday morning is the most racially segregated day of the week.

[34] See Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling*, 31, for a discussion of a similar process employed by Industrial Areas Foundation–affiliated organizations in Texas and Arizona.

[35] Mark Kind, "Group: Build Incentives to Foster Diversity," *The Kansas City Business Journal*, December 19, 2005. Accessed March 19, 2006 at: http://kansascity.bizjournals.com.

[36] Matt Campbell, "KC Hits Minority Hiring Targets," *The Kansas City Star*, September 14, 2006, B6. The city's report found that racial minorities comprised 19.88% of the workforce on publicly financed projects while women comprised 4.58% for a combined total of 24.46%, which exceeded its combined goal of 15.7%.

[37] Rev. Margaret Roberts, speaking on behalf of MORE2, quoted in Campbell, ibid. In particular, MORE2 is concerned that some projects fell short of the hiring and contracting goals for women and women-owned businesses. With their ability to raise awareness, place goals on the public agenda of local officials, and hold public officials accountable for achieving those goals, MORE2 provides a type of "popular oversight" that is one of the many potential functions of small, citizen-based groups described as "mini-publics" by Robert Goodin and John Dryzek; see "Deliberative Impacts: The Macro-Political Uptake of Mini-Publics," *Politics & Society* 34, no. 2 (2006): 219–44.

[38] As the local journalist Lewis Diuguid wrote in *The Kansas City Star*, the Jericho Table offers "everyone a lot of badly needed hope. It is one of the few times the white community has joined the black community to try to overcome the confounding, generational problems of racism and discrimination in this area. That's always encouraging." See Lewis Diuguid, "Minority Hiring: Promising Plan for Job Parity," *The Kansas City Star*, February 1, 2006, B-7.

[39] Walzer, "Equality and Civil Society," 43, emphasis added.

[40] For a much more thorough treatment of the weaknesses of Putnam's account of social capital, see especially Barbara Arneil's *Diverse Communities: The Problem with Social Capital* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[41] See Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 359, and Peter Levine's *The New Progressive Era: Toward a Fair and Deliberative Democracy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

[42] In this context it must be emphasized that the project of liberal egalitarianism is ongoing, and often suffers setbacks. For a recent account of the failure of civil society to produce vertical social capital and elicit policy changes from local political entities in the area of public school reform in urban Baltimore, see Marion Orr, *Black Social Capital: The Politics of School Reform in Baltimore, 1986–1998* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999). For a recent account

of the largely successful strategies pursued by mediating groups in the American Southwest, see Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling*.

43 Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1992). See also Theda Skocpol, "Unravelling From Above," *The American Prospect* 25 (March–April 1996): 20–25.

44 See Glenn T. Eskew, *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997).