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# SOCIAL CAPITAL, CULTURE AND THEORIES OF DEVELOPMENT\*

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**ABSTRACT** This article offers a critical review of the concept of social capital, focusing on the theoretical underpinnings of the communitarian approach. It argues that this approach has a culturalist bias that omits key issues of inequality, conflict and power, making it a tool that is unlikely to contribute significantly to poverty reduction or development. As an example, it describes the adoption of the concept by the World Bank and provides a case study of rural community organization in Ecuador.

**KEY WORDS:**

Development, participation, social capital, social networks, World Bank.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7440/antipoda18.2014.10>

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\* This article is based on the author's doctoral dissertation titled *Evaluating the World Bank's Concept of Social Capital: A Case Study in the Politics of Participation and Organization in a Rural Ecuadorian Community*. Research and dissertation writing funds were granted by the National Science Foundation and the University of Florida, respectively.

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## CAPITAL SOCIAL, CULTURA Y TEORÍAS DE DESARROLLO

**RESUMEN** Este artículo ofrece una revisión crítica del concepto de capital social y se enfoca en los fundamentos teóricos del enfoque comunitario. Argumenta que esta aproximación tiene un sesgo culturalista que omite temas clave de desigualdad, conflicto y poder, lo que la convierte en una herramienta que difícilmente contribuirá significativamente a la reducción de la pobreza y el desarrollo. Como ejemplo, describe la adopción del concepto por parte del Banco Mundial y presenta un estudio de caso sobre la organización rural comunitaria en Ecuador.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:**

Desarrollo, participación, capital social, redes sociales, Banco Mundial.

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**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:**

Desenvolvimento, participação, capital social, redes sociais, Banco Mundial.

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# SOCIAL CAPITAL, CULTURE AND THEORIES OF DEVELOPMENT

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**I**N A PAPER LEADING TO THE WORLD BANK'S 2002 WORLD Development Report, John Williamson, the economist who coined the term "Washington Consensus", described the theoretical phases that economic development thinking has experienced since World War II (2000). The first one, lasting from the 1940s to the 1960s, emphasized the accumulation of physical capital as a way to achieve development. Under this framework, the factors of production were the stepping-stones of growth. In the second phase, running through the 1960s, human capital, that bundle of knowledge and skills held by individuals, became the explanatory variable of choice. It accounted for the unequal growth observed between the developed and underdeveloped world, the latter, lagging behind despite the adoption of development-oriented policies and the beginnings of large-scale aid. Finally, in the third phase, which according to Williamson prevails to this day, scholars favor the idea that institutional performance influences economic outcomes; in other words: "there was a growing recognition that bad institutions can sabotage good policies" (2000: 261). While Williamson's synopsis referred to larger, national-level scales when he says that institutions affect productivity, rural development experts have applied this paradigm to community-driven development, theorizing that stronger and more democratic local institutions are fundamental to spark economic development. In this line of thinking, institutional performance is closely related to cultural values and social practices, and how these, in turn, influence local organizational capacity.

At the World Bank, the idea that participation in formal associations is key to the alleviation of poverty has taken considerable hold since the mid-1990s, legitimizing the idea that micro-level rural development is about understanding how social relations and cultural norms affect organizational capacity, and how they should be strengthened or transformed in order to achieve development. The general picture is that the causes of poverty and underdevelopment rest on systems of values and forms of organization. In this regard, social capital is appealing because it facilitates efficient and inclusive local institutions. When communities have social capital, they possess the right mix of ingredients lead-

ing to cooperation and trust. In other words, they possess social and cultural qualities that make their associations, organizations and other formal and informal collectivities work better. While other factors such as infrastructure, means of production, and human capital are important, the values associated with social capital are the causal variable in development. For anthropologists, this is an area of central interest as it brings together diverse aspects of the relation between culture, economics, and politics. Particularly, the way global development policies attempt to incorporate local systems of thought and organization to inform their theories and operations.

This paper focuses on the implications that the use of social capital as a concept carries for rural community development theory. In doing so, it explores the uses of culture and social organization as explanatory variables in participatory, locally based development. Social capital, I argue, is a simple form of culturalism that disregards conflict, history, and structural variables that limit participation and organization at the local level. The article offers a synthetic discussion of the concept illustrated by a case study based on fieldwork carried out in coastal Ecuador in 2004 and 2005<sup>1</sup>. In this way, I hope to contribute to a critical approach to social capital in development (see for example, Bretón 2002, Cleaver 2005; Fine 2001, 2010; Harriss 2002, Martínez Valle 2003, Putzel 1997 y Somers 2008) sustained by empirical data. The paper is divided in two parts. The first part justifies the discussion of social capital in cultural anthropology, followed by insights into the history of the concept at the World Bank. Next, it reviews the two main approaches to the concept: the communitarian and resources schools. Taking the latter as a springboard, the second half discusses the practical and theoretical consequences of the concept based on ethnographic data on the politics of associational life in a rural community in coastal Ecuador (De la Peña 2008).

## WHY THE DISCUSSION OF SOCIAL CAPITAL IN ECONOMIC ANTHROPOLOGY?

Despite its current popularity, social capital is in many ways a renewed take on classic anthropological debates on the nature and constitution of peasant societies. The way in which individuals negotiate their community-level obligations with the demands exerted upon them by the outside world has been amply discussed in anthropology (see for example, Cancian 1972, Foster 1967, Wolf 1966) and are all contained in some form or another in its contemporary approaches. The debate, in other words, has a robust pedigree, which is taken

<sup>1</sup> Data collected under National Science Foundation Doctoral Dissertation Research Grant BCS-0413917.

for granted in the social capital literature. In this sense, revisiting foundational works in anthropology is significant because it situates social capital in the course of a scholarly tradition interested in the relation between systems of morality, and social, economic, and political practices. In order to illustrate this idea, I offer a short review of Eric Wolf's notion of peasant coalitions (1966). Interestingly enough, his now classic inquiries also provide an example of an explanatory framework that moves across scales of analysis to relate larger structural and historical factors with local ideologies of what it means to produce, exchange, and survive in a peasant society --something missing in communitarian approaches to social capital.

In *Peasants* (1966), Wolf puts forward the idea that the peasant household faces constant and ever-changing pressures that influence their survival. To begin with, environmental events such as droughts, plagues, and floods, generate uncertainty as they are beyond their control. Secondly, the peasant household faces socio-economic pressures, sometimes as a result of a growing population with limited amounts of land to share, or because of differences in access to capital and productive resources. In addition, pressures emanating from the larger society (1966: 77), many of them coming from the state and its actions, such as relocation, taxation, and even persecution and extermination contribute to particular practices and ideologies. These pressures, nonetheless, are selective, as some households will have better access to water, more available labor, have fewer children and more land. Therefore, there is an internal differentiation of households that the community as a whole has to deal with. To solve this problem, two options are available to them. The first one is to let selective pressures take their course and weed out those who cannot make it as small-scale producers. The second is to establish mechanisms intended to help those households in distress. As such, communities enact ways to re-distribute resources from those who have more to those who are in need. As Wolf tells us, most peasantries fall somewhere in between the two options, nonetheless, the reason why households and communities develop support mechanisms is because peasants know that fortunes can be reversed from one season to the next (1966: 80). Today's winners can be tomorrow's losers, and vice versa.

Needless to say, Wolf did not frame the problem of uncertainty in peasant livelihoods in terms of possible relations between differential levels of household welfare and levels of trust and participation, something of central importance for social capital experts. I dare say that for him, it would be of limited value to understand differences in poverty levels by isolating variables such as "organizational capacity" or "willingness to participate". For him, like

many other students of peasant societies, social relations are multidimensional, sometimes serving a single purpose, most times interweaving several objectives in one relationship.

### PEASANT COALITIONS

Wolf, saw two main types of coalitions that define peasant social relations: those that bring people together around a single interest, and those in which its members share multiple interests (1966: 81). The first he called *singlestranded*, the second one, *manyst stranded*. In single stranded coalitions, two or more persons join forces with the purpose of advancing a specific goal. An example is rural associations such as funeral groups, irrigation and producers associations. Members of this type of coalition are usually bound by a particular interest, which does not necessarily demand that its participants be involved with one another beyond this cause. A manystranded coalition, on the other hand: "is built upon through the interweaving of many ties, all of which imply one another" (1966: 81). Economic transactions may be influenced by kinship relations, which in turn may require specific obligations and rights; furthermore, these might limit the range of options in other spheres of life. Each type of relation is like a strand; together they provide great security to people at different levels. On the other hand, this interlocking of strands is the source of its own weakness as they tie people together into inflexible relations that are difficult to disentangle. An idea similar to the negative side of social capital, where closed and bounded groups contravene the benefits of building a network of relations as they are unable to build bridges.

Over forty years after its publication, this analysis may seem obvious for scholars of rural society; nonetheless, social capital in development could derive considerable insight from it. First, because it places cultural values as part of a larger social universe, one in which the material conditions of peasant life, the political inequalities faced by them, and the symbols that reinforce the system (such as those found in religious ceremonies) feed each other in complex ways. The moment Wolf forces us to look at the interrelated character of multi-faceted roles, class, and environmental factors, it becomes very difficult to think of social relations as an investment that promotes economic growth, or at least, higher welfare levels. Furthermore, it also becomes increasingly problematic to think of social relations (i.e. social capital) as something inherently positive in terms of achieving collective benefits. We are left wondering to what degree the decisions made by small-scale producers are guided by community obligations, and conversely, the degree to which those decisions are meant to benefit them as individuals. Such are the questions that frame social capital as a global development policy today. In the next section, I shall explore part of that history at the World Bank.

## SOCIAL CAPITAL AT THE WORLD BANK

As the World Bank became increasingly interested in local institutions and forms of organization and participation, the concept of social capital rapidly took root in the institution. Its ascent was without doubt meteoric (Sommers 2008), reaching the influential Vice Presidency for Development Economics and the Office of the President by the mid-nineties (Bebbington 2006, 16). The publication of Robert Putnam's *Making Democracy Work* (1994) was pivotal to this sequence of events. In his book, Putnam claims that democracy and development are directly linked to the quantity and quality of civic engagement in a society. In his view, a culture of association sets the ground for democratic governance as it generates and sustains networks of trust. Local ideologies are central to Putnam's proposition; social capital refers to values -such as trust and solidarity- that live in the historical practices of peoples and that help to build democracy and development. Putnam understands local cultural values as the causal variable in political and economic performance. His theory of economic and political performance was quickly discussed and adopted at the World Bank, and is considered the foundation of the so-called communitarian view of social capital. Anthony Bebbington (2004), himself one of the first non-economist social scientists to support the adoption of the term, indicates that the communitarian approach was a compromise between those who wanted to frame social capital in a political economy approach and those who favored the institutional economics language. In the end, the latter prevailed, in part due to pressure from development economists, but also as: "a concession to the perceived gain of keeping open a discussion with the Development Economics group, *enrolling them* in the social development enterprise and keeping a conversation open with the language of economics" (Bebbington, 2004, 43). In the communitarian approach, social capital is comparable to a public good, an intangible tradition that lives in the collective ethos of societies (Arneil, 2006). In that sense, it is monolithic and inflexible in its conception of how values and practices are reproduced and created locally. It is composed of specific core values (trust, reciprocity, cooperation, among other positive qualities) that guide the behavior of entire communities. In this view, not only is culture a large, predictable, and essential pattern, but societies also appear to be located on an evolutionary scale, where some values and belief systems permit greater economic and political advancement than others<sup>2</sup>. The communitarian

2 Harrison's *Underdevelopment is a State of Mind – The case of Latin America* (1985) set the stage for cultural approaches to development, much in the tradition of culture and personality studies in the anthropology of the 1930's and 1940's.

view also emphasizes cultures of civic participation, and the way local values such as trust, cooperation, and solidarity, influence the participatory practices of individuals. Usually missing in this approach are issues of conflict, inequality, and differential access to resources. The constraints, limitations or strategic resistance faced and enacted by actors is absent. As a result, small-scale societies such as indigenous, peasant, and other historically excluded groups are homogeneous in their value systems and therefore very little room is left to discuss links between local and global economic and political transformations (see Fine 2001). Before discussing structural limitations to participation, a review of two different sets of literature on social capital will be done starting with one that favors the communitarian approach, commonly associated with World Bank's specialists, and then the resources or networks approach, which analyzes the structural advantages and disadvantages of individuals in society, a formulation very much absent in development formulations of social capital.

## DEFINITIONS

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The Social Capital Initiative (SCI), part of the Social Development Department at the World Bank was for most of the 1990s at the forefront of social capital studies in the institution (Bebbington 2006, 13). SCI scholars defined social capital as the institutions, norms, values, and beliefs that govern interaction among people and facilitate economic and social development (Krishna and Shrader 2002; Grootaert and van Bastelaer 2002a; 2002b). In addition, social capital was conceived as containing multiple social and cultural phenomena, including values that *predispose* people to cooperate, such as trust and reciprocity, and institutional forms that *facilitate* cooperation, such as local organizations, associations, and the rules that define them. According to the SCI, taken together, these measures could be evaluated to assess the potential of communities to organize themselves for mutually beneficial goals (Krishna and Shrader 2002). These values and norms, in the end, predispose and facilitate the creation and maintenance of organizations, which in turn, provide larger socio-economic benefits.

Of the many forms that social capital can take, World Bank specialists argue that membership in organizations is the most successful form available to improve household welfare, in particular that of poor households (Grootaert 2001). Grootaert, one of the main architects of the concept at the Bank, tells us that when people belong to organizations composed of members of diverse occupational and educational backgrounds they have an opportunity to exchange information and knowledge, not only about matters related to the organization, but also about social and economic opportunities outside of it. In other words, organizations link people to opportunities through social

ties. Most people who belong to an organization will develop friendships and acquaintances that could potentially provide information about jobs, services, business opportunities, and so on. Grootaert's assertion, as we will see later, is in some ways similar to the claims of social network scholars interested in social capital: the more diverse your network, the richer the information available to you. Nonetheless, in the networks approach, the potential benefits of the information received by an individual also depend on the economic and social characteristics of those in the network, and the specific ways that contacts and actors are connected. As we will see, some people are better connected than others, and some networks have more assets than others.

### CONCEPTUAL DISAGREEMENTS

There are dozens, perhaps hundreds of definitions of the term (Fine 2010), most of them molded to the needs of the question at hand. Most of these definitions fall within two opposing theoretical constructions: the communitarian and the resources or network approaches. The former defines social capital as a public good and as the sum of collective benefits derived from civic participation. The latter, as those resources an individual has available through his or her network of social relations. The scholars associated with social capital at the World Bank saw social capital as bringing together the cultural, context-specific features of behavior, and universal, rational economic thinking. In this frame of analysis, the metaphor social capital seemed appropriate, for the word capital implied a return on an investment which in this case would equate to social relations. Equating social relations with capital has generated considerable debate amongst economists, adding to an already heated discussion across the social sciences. For example, Nobel Prize recipient Robert Solow calls social capital "an attempt to gain conviction from a bad analogy" (1999, 8). He goes on to say:

It seems to me that this is what we should be studying: what is the available repertoire of behavior patterns in this situation or that, and how does one of them come to be entrenched as the standard? More generally, what kinds of institutions and habits make an economy or a society better able to adapt to changing circumstances by finding and imposing appropriate norms of behavior? I do not see how dressing this set of issues in the language and apparatus of capital theory helps much one way or another.

Kenneth Arrow, also an Economics Nobel recipient argues that social capital misses a fundamental characteristic of capital, as it requires: "deliberate sacrifice in the present for future benefits" (1999: 4). To believe "the social" in social capital fulfills this requirement is to think that all social relations are

forged as a conscious calculation for a future return; even the most orthodox neoclassical economist, he notes, would agree friendship and kinship have affective components that go beyond economic calculation. However, as the “social “ in social capital does not only include relations but also larger social and cultural variables, it would erroneously imply that we are all socialized from childhood to engage in social relations for a return (1999: 4). This issue brings us to the epistemological crux of the matter, what is the advantage of equating social and cultural practices with capital? Why do we need to think of social relations as economic wealth? Part of the problem is that development theory still depends on the parsimony that mathematical modeling offers to advance its ideas. Efficient, universal models of human behavior provide the retractable mathematical analysis necessary to make economic theory work, and in turn, development policy. Social capital at the World Bank seems to be an example of this process, as Bebbington tells us, the communitarian approach was a compromise between discordant schools at the World Bank (2004). While one was seeking quantitative measures, another was attempting qualitative approaches and this does not mention the theoretical preferences. As I mentioned previously, economists insisted on couching the term on econometric language, in order to standardize and legitimize it, while scholars of a political bent attempted to frame it along a political-economy line. Ultimately, the latter failed:

The process of the (social capital) group was revealing. Two external academics were invited to join – political scientist Jonathan Fox and economist Mancur Olson. As the group progressed, the argument that a discussion of social capital should be linked to themes in institutional economics (à la Olson) more than to themes in political economy (à la Fox) slowly won the day. Certainly there were pressures from development economists to shift the discussion in this direction – and it is also notable that in the end two of the three authors of the final report of the Social Development Task Force were economists”. (Bebbington et al. 2004, 44)

Social capital, it appears, is a compromise between the need to acknowledge that social externalities affect economic performance and the necessity to make a complex social concept universal, comparable, and generalizable in its application.

For anthropologists interested in economics and development, the history of social capital at the Bank is illuminating in the way it rekindles old debates about the nature of culture in economic decision-making. When people make a decision regarding production, exchange, and consumption, how are we to understand the role of values and morality? What are the most appropriate analytical tools to explain decision-making? Furthermore, when

individuals and groups organize for productive purposes, to what degree can their decisions be explained through formal models where rational choice acts as a universal human feature? To what degree are choices culturally bound?<sup>3</sup> Social capital, in this sense, is located within a larger discussion of culture and economics. In the next sections, I further explore the debate by looking at the communitarian and networks approaches to social capital.

### THE COMMUNITARIAN VIEW

A number of researchers have argued that the idea of social capital was initially conceived as a cultural and social condition exercised at the individual level (Lin 2000; Portes and Landolt 2000). The two most influential contemporary scholars on the subject, Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and James Coleman (1988), believed social capital was an investment individuals made on social relations in order to derive some type of benefit. Bourdieu thought this benefit would be the maintenance and reproduction of domination by elites (1986). Coleman theorized that the sum of individual gains could translate into solutions to the problems of larger social groups (1988). Arguably, Coleman's approach serves as the theoretical foundation for uses of social capital in economic development an idea that influenced Putnam's work on civic life in two Italian regions (Fine 2001; Harriss 2002; Millán y Gordon 2004; Portes and Landolt 2000). As mentioned above, Putnam argues that democracy and development are heavily influenced by cultures or traditions of civic participation. Taking the example of northern versus southern Italy, he noticed that economically developed societies (like northern Italian towns) have a stronger culture of civic association. People in this part of Italy are more likely to join associations and have a richer associational culture, both in terms of the number of informal associations they belong to and the strength of their performance. On the contrary, southern Italian towns, less developed economically, do not exhibit a rich tradition of civic association. In fact, joining groups and doing things collectively seems to be heavily dependent on a history of authoritarian, patron-client relations that limit who can participate where. Putnam's linkage of poverty to democratic participation established the foundations for a theory of social capital as a cultural and collective property with the capacity to transform economic conditions. From then on, the underlying idea behind the concept has been that cultural values are mostly, if not exclusively a cognitive phenomenon, a form of mental model that resides in people's heads and is transmitted generation to generation (see for example Guiso et al. 2007).

3 For a lucid analysis of these issues see Wilk and Cligget (2006) and Chibnik (2011).

A common application of the Putnam approach is the idea that social relations have a spillover effect on economic activities. Grootaert, for example, has shown that membership in associations in Bolivia, Burkina Faso, and Indonesia generates higher returns for poorer households, whether by expenditure per capita or land ownership (2002a). In what is perhaps the most influential study on social capital, Narayan and Pritchett (1999) conclude that generalized trust in Tanzanian communities is a function of village cohesion and norms, independent of household income (2002a). Grootaert (1999) also concluded that access to credit is positively associated with membership on both economically and non-economically oriented organizations in Indonesia. In other words, scholars associated with the World Bank have statistically shown that social capital is a causal factor in household welfare. Once again, this is proof of the spillover effect that social relations have on economic activities, as information is transmitted from economically oriented groups to other groups in society. From these results the next logical conclusion is to think of social capital as a cultural property, as something that some communities possess as part of their historical development. It is part of a community's norms and values<sup>4</sup>.

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### THE NETWORKS VIEW

A common critique of the communitarian approach is that it results in tautological explanations of what causes differential economic and political performance among groups. This argument points out that by defining social capital both as a structural attribute (e.g. organizations and associations) and as a cognitive form (e.g. trust and reciprocity); the sources of social capital become indistinguishable from its outcomes (Harriss 2002; Lin 2001a; 2001b). For example, an organization such as a rotating savings and credit association is a collective manifestation of social capital, yet, the trust and reciprocity that make it work are also forms of social capital, thus, a circular explanation results as causal factors (i.e. trust) are defined by their effects (i.e. associational life) (Fine 2010; Harriss 2002; Lin 2001a; Woolcock 1998).

The networks view of social capital, which derives many of its theoretical positions from social network analysis (SNA), argues that conceptualizing

4 A more nuanced version of how social capital operates is provided by Woolcock and Narayan (2000). They introduce the idea of bridging and bonding capitals. The latter refers to the levels of cohesion that social groups have at local levels, for example villages, associations, and clubs. The former indicates the ability of these groups to transcend their local environment to reach groups and institutions different from them and operating in different institutional spaces. For example, second degree organizations that link village-level associations, and non-governmental organizations. This version of social capital argues that it is a combination of both types of capital that generates economic and social development as local organizations are able to more effectively lobby policy makers.

social capital as an asset held at the individual level allows scholars to differentiate its causes from its outcomes (Lin 2001a; 2001b). Valued resources are embedded in social structures characterized by distributional and rank differences (Lin 1999; 2001b). The higher the rank, the greater the concentration of valued resources, in other words, the better the position of origin in a social network, the more likely the actor will access and use social capital (Lin 2001b). SNA researchers have shown that differences in gender, ethnicity, and status in individuals influence their ability to obtain benefits derived from membership in a social network (Campbell, Mardsen and Hurlbert 1986; Lin 1999; Lin and Dumin 1986; Silvey and Elmhirst 2003). Bourdieu, one of the most influential theoreticians among networks specialists, argued that a person's social capital could be asserted by aggregating: 1) the size of his or her network and 2) the volume of social, cultural, and economic capital of the network members (1986 in Zhao 2002). From his perspective, embedded resources such as information and the influence of its members are social capital. Lin (200a; 2000b) has further refined this conceptual framework by seeing social capital as assets located in networks which can be measured through two main categories: 1) as embedded resources and 2) as network locations. The first one refers to the power, wealth, and influence available in a network and the resources that each contact in the network can provide. The second is more concerned with the structure of the network and how certain characteristics of a network, such as actors acting as bridges facilitate or impede returns to other actors. Beyond the explanatory technicalities of formal network analysis, the point is that social capital is a resource that is differentially available to individuals depending on where they stand in the structure of relations of the group. Class, race, ethnicity, religion and gender, to name some, are categories that position social actors in the structure of social relations. In other words, whatever forms of stratification and inequality are at play in the constitution of social life in a community, they will be reflected in the processes of participation in its formal associations (Cleverly, 2001; 2007).

## **SOCIAL CAPITAL IN CONTEXT**

Reviewing the literature on social capital in its civic and communitarian forms leaves the reader with the idea that by the time people actually put into practice their cultural knowledge, some innate and automatic cultural logic has already told them what to do. As such, people are either prone to work together (or not), much in the sense that some communities have larger stocks of social capital than others; which explains their levels of development. This mostly dichotomous view sees culture as something that either contains virtuous knowledge that bonds people together, as in

some ideal indigenous society, or conversely, it constrains development by subjecting them to tradition (Cleaver 2001: 47). In other words, no complex explanation of the relationship between culture and economics can be gained by defining culture as something acting autonomously in people's heads, detached from history, politics, and social relations.

Next, I offer an ethnographic account of the organizational challenges faced by the people of Limoncito,<sup>5</sup> a rural community located in the Province of Santa Elena in the coast of Ecuador. The account I offer on the struggle of Limonciteños to act collectively that is, to harness social capital, is illustrative of the points I am attempting to make as it brings together multiple scales of economic, political and socio-cultural interaction. Limoncito in this sense provides a space to problematize the idea of social capital as a result of a homogeneous, localized system of values.

### THE SETTING

Limoncito is a rural community that operates under a communal land tenure regime called Comuna. This form of territorial unit was established by the national Ecuadorian government in 1937 as a form of social protection against the excesses of monopolistic agricultural practices. By law, Comuneros --those who are members of a Comuna-- take decisions regarding their territory by vote in Comuna assemblies. In this regard, the Comuna is an institutional arrangement that calls for collective participation and discussion of issues affecting all its members. Comunas are a significant development in Ecuador because they have provided legal certainty to its residents and offered an institutional presence recognized by the national government. However, while the law protects communal land tenure, it also demarcates territories, assigns legal responsibilities, and places local government under the supervision of national authorities. In the Santa Elena Peninsula (as the Province has been historically called) one of the most notorious consequences of this transition was the severe limitations experienced by Comuneros to use diverse ecological zones, in particular to raise cattle over extended territories, an activity practiced since late colonial times by Indians and non-Indians (Alvarez 1999). In addition to the economic and ecological transformations created by the formalization of Comunas, the political organization of communities was changed.

In Limoncito, Comuna decisions are heavily influenced by a small group of families that represent both a long-standing leadership dating back

5 All places and names are pseudonyms.

to the origins of the Comuna in the late 1930s, as well as a new leadership that gained prominence in the 1979 when Limoncito was fully recognized and registered as a Comuna. This event marked the beginning of the formal adoption of the bylaws associated with the Law of Comunas, including the regulations and procedures for the election of the local governing body called the Cabildo.

The establishment of the first formal Cabildo saw its first challenge in the need to embrace the diverse interests of its members. Limoncito is composed of 5 main settlements, called recintos, each of them comprising between 20 and 60 households, gathered around extended family units. The Comuna, for many of them, was a point of reference to exert a Comunero-campesino economy and identity, but not necessarily an institutional unit to plan and regulate their life. The result of the formal establishment of the Comuna was that five small villages whose social, economic, and political organization revolved mostly around a limited number of extended families had to adopt a new governmental and administrative system, whose ultimate consequence was the subordination of decision-making processes to a centralized Comuna government controlled by a set of dominant actors. The residents of smaller, peripheral recintos thought that the Comuna as an institution designed to protect their life-style was a good proposition, yet they felt increasingly ignored in local policy decisions under a new centralized government in the hands of powerful families located in the central recintos. The issue was further complicated by the complexity of land uses and property in the Comuna. Many families in these smaller recintos had titles to their parcels pre-dating the original 1938 enactment of the Comuna, leading some of them to wonder why they had to pay membership dues to be part of a Comuna if they had titles to their own lands. The details of the titling arrangements of these Comuneros are beyond the purposes of this paper, however, the issue is that participatory-organizational issues are tightly woven into the agrarian and material aspects of a community.

### **AGRARIAN DISPUTES OVER A LARGE IRRIGATION PROJECT**

By the late 1990s, Comuneros were engaged in yet another disagreement over the transformation of communal lands into titled, individualized parcels. The planning and arrival of a large network of irrigation canals in the Peninsula funded by the national government and multinational development agencies made some of Limoncito's communal lands economically valued. Their location in the area of influence of the canals made them a desirable asset in

the eyes of investors and speculators. External actors offered to buy land, a process that had started in the southern Comunas of the peninsula since the early 1990s. Under the 1999 Limoncito Cabildo administration, the general assembly drafted and approved a proposal to assign parcels of up to 50 ha to those Comuneros wishing to do so, these lands could be titled as individual, private parcels. Applicants however, had to be members in good standing, current with their dues. Seventy nine requests were granted under the proposal. According to Felipe Hurtado, a former Cabildo official, soon after the first plots were adjudicated:

Five Comuneros who had contiguous lands sold 240 ha for 3 million sucres per hectare (20 dollars of 1996); the plots were next to the canal and were bought by a foreigner, most likely an intermediary. What happened next is that the moment those five sold, everybody wanted to request land plots to sell, but not everyone was up to date with their membership fees, and others have lost their membership rights, as they have not attended assembly meetings. Nonetheless, all petitions were granted. (2002 personal communication)

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The reason all petitions were accepted was the considerable disagreement that ensued after the assembly decided that only Comuneros in good standing would be granted approval of their petitions. In Limoncito, like many other Comunas, is very common to have members who attend to all Comuna assemblies, that is, take part in discussions, vote over proposals, and cooperate in diverse tasks, but are years behind in their dues. Equally so, there are a number of members who live in nearby urban areas who are up to date in their dues but rarely attend assemblies. To Comuneros, it was obvious that the sudden appearance of the irrigation canals was a source of conflict. One that aggravates the recent history of disagreements over the role of local government and land tenure practices. In this sense, associational processes, including Comuna membership and local governance are difficult to separate from political and economic interests. In the next section, I explore in further detail the relationship between local political disputes and Comuna membership, the main formal association in the community.

## THE POLITICS OF MEMBERSHIP

In Limoncito, Comuneros are constantly juggling their pledge towards their recinto with the needs of the larger Comuna. Each recinto has their own associations, all with economic, social and cultural objectives as established locally. The dilemma over recinto and Comuna priorities is enacted in the process of becoming a member of the Comuna. In 2004, a group mainly com-

posed of women residents applied for membership to the Comuna. All of them resided in Algarrobos, the second largest recinto, which historically has disputed control over Comuna policy with Tres Mangos, the largest one. The applicants stated that they wanted to enjoy the benefits of membership, which include a parcel of land and an urban allotment to build a house and a garden. To others, the move was also intended to tip the balance of power towards Algarrobos by giving them more votes in the Comuna assembly. For some Comuneros, this is a real concern as the few projects, services, and infrastructure gained or provided by the State or non-governmental organizations have to be physically located in one recinto, therefore, benefiting one sector of the Comuna more than others.

The candid confession made by a former Cabildo officer over what happened with the applications exemplifies the dilemma faced by Limonciteños over decision-making power between the two recintos:

Truth is I never sent the names and documents of the new applicants to the Ministry. I said I did, but in fact, I didn't... They were a lot of people, had I sent the applications to the Ministry, Algarrobos would have had the majority. Can you imagine what they would have done? (Casas 2005 personal communication)

Some Cabildo officers saw the incorporation of this group as a real threat to the cohesion of the Comuna and its assembly meetings. The group, they argued, was made up of very confrontational individuals, and during a period, their interventions led to physical confrontations during general assemblies. Shouting matches and accusations that sometimes ended in verbal and physical aggression were common. Some Cabildo officers believe that as a result of the confrontational nature of the assemblies and a general discontent with local government, many Comuneros had stopped attending them. During my stay in Limoncito, general assemblies rarely ever reached quorum. Assembly business went on as usual, but officials and members knew that they were not following procedure, as this could not be carried out without the majority of members. However, the relation between associational practices and the formalities of government is not circumscribed to the village level. Regional and national governance are also connected.

## FORMAL POLITICS BEYOND THE COMUNA

The problem of national politics influencing collective action is evident during political campaigning and the election of municipal officials. In many ways, the Comuna's economic well-being is dependent upon the relation-

ship it develops with candidates running for office, particularly those aspiring to be *Alcalde* (mayor). Supporting the winning contender means a greater access to services and infrastructure as previously negotiated during the election campaign. Recinto leaders, as well as Cabildo officers, usually support a candidate, sometimes based on shared party affiliation or on his or her policy agenda. It is not uncommon for local Comuna officials to campaign on behalf of candidates in exchange for social and economic favors for their associations, the recinto, or the Comuna as a whole. Libio Mendez (2004 personal communication), former President of the Comuna put it this way: “I have brought projects through politician friends that have power. I have made agreements with them to help them, and in exchange they include me in their budgets to carry out projects.... It is embarrassing to ask politicians for money, but there is no other way, so I stick to them”.

In 2004, the Cabildo officers had pledged their political support to three different candidates running for mayor. The candidates themselves knew this and saw Limoncito as a politically ambiguous community. In other words, as Cabildo officials did not represent a united front to bargain with mayoral candidates, therefore the Comuna was weakened in its lobbying power. The result was that each Cabildo official, negotiated on his/her own terms with candidates, each pushing for projects and public aid for his/her own recinto, and even for the exclusive benefit of members of their associations. From a communitarian perspective, the Comuna could be deemed a fractured socio-cultural unit unable to carry out its “civic duties”. People are not finding avenues to trust and cooperate with each other. Recinto-level associations are bypassing altogether the Cabildo in its role of political broker with municipal and national authorities. As a result, a micro fragmentation of political negotiations exists between the local community, regional, and national governments.

These new institutional arrangements are not necessarily detrimental to collective action. Small groups might be able to manage and control their resources better, however, the Comuna continues to stand as the legitimate representative of the rights of Comuneros to land, services, and development in general. It has the national government approval to navigate extracomuna political waters. Other possibilities exist, such as Second Degree Organizations (SDOs) that agglutinate diverse groups, including Comunas and independent associations; nonetheless, this instance presents some of the same disjunctives I have touched upon here (De la Peña 2008)<sup>6</sup>. Fausto

6 See also Bretón (2002) and Martínez Valle (2003) for critical perspectives on SDOs.

Salas, President of a recinto association and founder of several associations in Limoncito, is clear in this regard: “Today we have a Cabildo that could never agree on anything because they all belong to different political parties. I am never going to participate in the Cabildo as an officer; I prefer to work in my local committee. I am more at ease there” (2004 personal communication). Further research is needed to investigate reasons for participation and association that consider local systems of values and under multiple economic and political pressures. Given the trend to generate global policies of development, knowledge of local experiences is a must.

## CONCLUSION

The ethnographic account offered above highlighted the importance of larger historical and political contexts in the constitution of participatory and organizational capacities –centerpiece of communitarian social capital approaches. From this perspective, associational practices are carried out at different scales of interaction. Local ways to organize are not exclusively a local, cultural product, they are connected to institutional relations that go well beyond the local village. As such, the communitarian view of social capital as a public good carries two problematic ideas about the nature of social relations. First, that social capital can be converted into any tangible outcome (Natrajan and Ilahiane 2002); and second, that small-scale societies are homogeneous or even classless, and that everyone has the same access to resources (Durrenberger 2002; Edwards and Foley 1996; Harriss 2002). This is a particularly problematic point for those communities that are imagined as carriers of traditions of cooperation and participation (Martínez Valle 2003, Molyneux 2002), like a Comuna. However, local circumstances are central to understanding particular institutional trajectories. A crucial concern in social capital studies is that, since social capital is usually equated with collective action and organizational capacity, differences in welfare will be attributed to differences in abilities to organize and participate (Fine 2001, Fox 1996, Schafft and Brown 2003). In terms of policy, a further consequence of thinking of participatory choices as cultural imprints is that it reproduces the idea that poverty ultimately rests on the incapacities of poor people. They are incapable of accumulating trust, developing political connections, or engaging in collective action. In this framework, development outcomes are not related to politics, conflict, or inequality in access to resources.

A further challenge is to reconceive the idea of culture in social capital. As a final thought and potential avenue for analysis, I propose understand-

ing culture in action (Bourdieu 1977). For the purposes of social capital in development and its interest in knowing how culture structures people's lives, it is useful to observe the ways in which values and ideas materialize in situated political practices. By adopting this view, we begin to see that in the interactions of individuals, along with their categories, hierarchies, values, and other phenomena considered culture, there is a material side. In describing the way Comuneros carry on their associations and the relational practices we also begin to understand how class relations, kinship categories, and gender hierarchies, are all arenas to find culture in practice. Students of the interaction between culture and development would benefit from an idea of participation in which we look for: "what the participants in the interactions are up to, what counts as meaningful to them, what they are paying attention to, and for what purposes" (Duranti 1997:8). This inductive exercise allows the researcher to build explanations of the cultural foundations of development that are informed by the economic, social, and political realities people face on a daily basis. ✨

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