

The Ethics of Social Cohesion

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With trust as its antecedent, social capital comprises the potential capacities of a people to prosper. Building on the presence of social capital, social cohesion involves the internalization of social ethics and constitutes the level of realized propensity among citizens to engage in virtuous behavior for the common good. This theory elaboration asserts that social cohesion is defined largely by the autonomy of the individual to do good across group dynamics and organizational boundaries. The degree to which they act in a way that is beneficent to society as a whole is the degree to which we could say they have been “cohered” to that society.

Social cohesion is simultaneously an economic and a social phenomenon. Accordingly, it can be defined in terms of capital, value, and ethics. The intrinsic worth of humans and their relationships can be understood as human, social, and cultural capital. Viewing our lives as integrated provides us with a rich framework by which we can begin to understand our connection to the lives of others, including our interdependence on both the resources and the capital we share and build together in community. Our social, moral, and economic lives form the delicate matrix by which our worth as a society is to be measured.

The quality of the relationships forming this matrix is predicated by values that produce the ethics and norms by which a society functions. The nature of those values determines the strength of the relationships, which

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ultimately dictate how stably a group of people will function in society. This stability and its resultant level of functioning will then likely determine the amount of wealth that will inhere in that society, thus perpetuating a level of social cohesion. Of importance, we use the concept of perpetuation here (and not creation) because social cohesion should be understood *not* as the product of wealth but rather as its antecedent. Much in the same way that Weber juxtaposed Karl Marx's central argument, we should try to envision "that it was not underlying economic forces that created cultural products like religion and ideology but rather culture that produced certain forms of economic behavior" (Fukuyama, 1995, p. 43). This concept brings to light the great importance of the underlying values and ethics of a society, and it helps us understand the historical error of compartmentalizing our economic and social lives. Fukuyama cogently described this reality:

Economic activity represents a crucial part of social life and is knit together by a wide variety of norms, rules, moral obligations, and other habits that together shape the society. ... Economic life is deeply embedded in social life, and it cannot be understood apart from the customs, morals, and habits of the society in which it occurs. In short, it cannot be divorced from culture. ... Consequently, we have been ill served by contemporary economic debates that fail to take account of these cultural factors. (pp. 7, 14–15)

In essence, prosperous and stable societies are regulated by deeply embedded ethical codes that are not narrowly defined by any one moral construct. Rather, these codes are determined by the varied social contexts in which humans locate their existence.

Social Capital and the Value of Trust

With increased attention to the idea of social cohesion over the past few years has come a blurring of the distinction between its conceptual basis and that of social capital. Of importance, these two concepts are deeply related to one another but must be understood separately for one to comprehend the dynamics by which they function together. We begin with Bourdieu (1986) and his classic definition of social capital:

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 member with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a “credential” which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word. (pp. 248–249)

It is important that we recognize that the underlying forces of social capital, as with social cohesion, are economic as well as social. Bourdieu highlighted that social relationships constitute the central form of combining resources in a society, which in turn serves as the basis for “credit” broadly defined. Similarly, Heyneman (personal communication, March 15, 2002) posited that social capital comprises the “social relationships of trust and reciprocity that enhance a group’s capacity to coordinate actions of their members as they work toward a collective good.” As such, *generalized social trust* then becomes the impetus by which humans are able to interact with one another in productive and meaningful ways. “Social capital is a capability that arises from the prevalence of trust in a society or in certain parts of it” (Fukuyama, 1995, p. 26). In other words, trust is the base component of the “glue” that holds the ideal society together and empowers stable economic activity among citizens. Vitally, trust brings with it an array of shared ethical norms, such as reciprocity, that allow for persons to enter freely into relationships with security and creativity. It allows people to combine their talents, ideas, assets, and other resources into a bank of human capital. It also draws on existing cultural mechanisms, such as custom, religion, and tradition, to create and sustain a constant level of social capital (Fukuyama, 1995). Consider the following:

Acquisition of social capital ... requires habituation to the moral norms of a community and, in its context, the acquisition of virtues like loyalty, honesty and dependability. The group, moreover, has to adopt common norms as a whole before trust can become generalized among its members. In other words, social capital cannot be acquired simply by individuals acting on their own. It is based on the prevalence of social, rather than individual virtues. The proclivity for sociability is much harder to acquire than other forms of human capital, but because it is based on ethical habit, it is also harder to modify or destroy. (Fukuyama, 1995, pp. 26–27)

Accordingly, if anyone of us is to be able to accomplish anything in concert with other people or groups, we must be able to trust them at some meaningful level. But as Fukuyama noted, trust is not merely an individual ethic: Trusting one’s self is hardly what is meant by real trust. By its very nature it is a communal ethic and virtue. It necessarily implies that

persons within organizations and societies can be readily vulnerable to others and flourish as a result. The element of mutual trust is exactly that upon which genuine organizational unity is founded. As Fairholm and Fairholm (2000) argued, “for leaders to lead they need a united and harmonious environment characterized by mutual trust It is a process of instilling and encouraging trust” (p. 102). From this process, security, creativity, and accountability develop among the constituents of an organization. Furthermore, it would be difficult to overstate the extent to which interpersonal relationships arise and solidify in relation to the degree that group member trust each other: “Trust, essential in interpersonal relationship, is based not only on the confidence and predictability of the actions of others, but also on the moral integrity and goodwill of another” (Fairholm & Fairholm, 2000, p. 103.). As such, a society’s greatest efforts should be aimed at consistently increasing the generalized level of trust thereof—among their citizens, within their organizations, and between their institutions and their people.

Social and economic prosperity has always been predicated on people’s ability to change and adapt. Social Darwinism has asserted so much and has almost certainly been upheld in this “postmodern age” and “new world order” we find ourselves in. Former Communist countries have been forced to completely readjust their social and economic spheres to sustain themselves in the global environment. Market-based structures and economies have proven so powerful and efficient that no country in the world could presently prosper (or possibly even survive) without buying into them. Vitally, the essence of such entities is predicated on trust. For are markets not almost entirely founded on banks? And are not the banks founded on the principles of gaining revenues primarily through interest payments? And do such arrangements at their base not constitute a system of credit that in its rawest form requires a promise to pay? And is not that promise to pay exactly a relationship made possible by the element of trust? One might argue that collateral plays a key role in this scenario. Indeed, but collateral alone does not come close to compensating fully for the obligations on either side of these agreements. Such agreements have become the foundation of economic advancement for much of the world. It has been well noted that “since long term private investment fuels everyone’s economic hopes, it is in everyone’s interest to create an acceptable mechanism to ensure that the chances for social stabilization are improved” (Heyneman, 1995, p. 3). It is the trust among persons, organizations, and communities that forms the base of this stabilizing mechanism and grounds the economic agreements that empower a prosperous society.

Central to this issue is the necessity of organizational adaptation. Both within and across global societies, it is the ability of groups of people to

recompose their logistical and operational functioning to accommodate new realities that determines the degree to which they will thrive or stagnate. Unprecedented levels of technological advancement and a global economy that is ever increasing in its complexity require social structures to keep pace. Without an inherently high level of trust, successful adaptation would not be possible. People naturally become familiar with “the way things are” and how they function. By and large people do not readily invite change or innovation, because it involves operating outside of that which is comfortable and well understood. They will, nonetheless, do so without force or duress if at least two conditions are met: (a) a high level of generalized trust is present, and (b) the perceived benefit of change is greater than the status quo. Naturally, the perceived benefit of change is itself almost entirely determined by trust, because it depends on trusting those who are advocating for it.

The key here is to understand that motivation in this context is almost entirely predicated on mutual trust. Fukuyama (1995) conceptualized this kind of motivation as “spontaneous sociability” and categorized it as subset of social capital. More specifically, he described it as “the capacity to form new associations and to cooperate within the terms of reference they establish. Spontaneous sociability, moreover, refers to that wide range of intermediate communities distinct from the family or those deliberately established by governments” (p. 27). Herein, such motivation cannot be imposed from above; rather, it emerges from within and between communities, both in cooperation and in competition (a concept we look at later in more detail). The fact that “communities depend on mutual trust and will not arise spontaneously without it” is the cornerstone of societal prosperity, and the resultant ability of communities to forge new relationships and dealings with each other is the antecedent of this achievement:

Spontaneous sociability is critical to economic life because virtually all economic activity is carried out by groups rather than individuals. Before wealth can be created, human beings have to learn to work together, and if there is to be subsequent progress, new forms of organization have to be developed. While we typically associate economic growth with technological development, organizational innovation has played an equal if not more important role since the beginning of the industrial revolution. (Fukuyama, 1995, p. 47)

Where spontaneous sociability typifies a society, the propensity for organizational adaptation is certain to be high. And where trust inheres, creativity, flexibility, ingenuity, and mutual accountability will elevate the members of that society to a place of dynamic cohesion—a place where

they will in turn become full participants in the processes that lead to economic development. Similarly, Bourdieu (1986) understood this process as a constant cycle of social and economic regeneration: "The reproduction of social capital presupposes an unceasing effort of sociability, a continuous series of exchanges in which recognition is endlessly affirmed and reaffirmed" (p. 250). Thus, it is within these countless exchanges that the element of trust is either created or destroyed and the level of productive sociability is determined.

Ultimately, we can well argue that the cohesion of our societies and overall health of their economies rest on the aggregate of trust that inheres in them. Even anecdotally, we know that serious breaches of trust, particularly in the forms of corruption and fraud, are terrible for societies' social and economic health. On the other hand, strengthening the ethical cultural mechanisms that structure people's lives within those societies in turn produces generalized trust and encourages them to act out of a shared commitment with confidence and reciprocity. With trust as its antecedent, social capital then comprises the potential capacities of a people to prosper, whereas social cohesion constitutes the level of realized propensity among them to engage in virtuous behavior for the common good.

The Autonomous Good

In talking about *the good*, there is neither assumption or denial about the existence of a deity or deities nor any assertion of what does or does not comprise morality. There is no expectation that the ideals and mores that serve as the antecedent of the good in society are necessarily founded on any grounds of belief. Having said that, however, it is also important to note that beliefs play a major role in the engendering and promulgating of the basic tenets of the good among and across members of societies.

Ultimately, if we say that social cohesion is defined largely by the autonomy of the individual to do good across group dynamics and organizational boundaries, we refer to both manifest actions and dispositions. For instance, prejudice and fear are dispositions that will necessarily translate into action—whether voluntary or involuntary—and certainly erode social cohesion. But when inclusive ethics and the cultural mechanisms of a society combine to cultivate in its members right or good autonomous responses that operate to the betterment of the social order as whole, we can say that social cohesion has increased.

As Heyneman (personal communication, March 15, 2002) defined it, "autonomous means actions in which individuals or organizations engage independent of fear of sanction. Autonomous action is guided and decided

personally, principally on the basis of what one accepts to be ‘right.’” Here, the nature of the “good” and what one accepts to be “right” emerge from the same theoretical reality. Imagine if we took an individual or a group of individuals, removed from them all liability for and fear of doing “wrong” or “harm,” and then turned them loose to act as players in the societal milieu. The degree to which they act in a way that is beneficent to society as a whole is the degree to which we could say they have been “cohered” to that society. Heyneman pointed out that “the reason autonomous behavior is important is that it is quite common in autocratic societies to find adherence to social norms and it is quite reasonable to ask, ‘Is this not a society characterized by social cohesion?’” The answer would likely be no. The intrinsic ethics of a people, not adherence to imposed norms or ideology, determine whether a society is characterized by social cohesion. In Communist China, there are many social norms that are prescribed by the government and its respective institutions, but one could hardly deduce from this kind of adherence that Chinese society is cohesive. Certainly, “authoritarian regimes and beleaguered communities can mimic social cohesion in that they create orderliness, shared values, communities of interpretation and a sometimes dramatic ability to undertake collective action, but at the cost of being coercive, exclusionary, and rarely sustainable” (Strategic Research and Analysis and the Social Cohesion Network, 2001, p. 3). Normative does not necessarily constitute cohesive.

However, this is not to say that the government cannot foster social cohesion. Indeed, government has a primary role in accomplishing exactly that task through a multitude of its own mechanisms. Certainly, “a thriving civil society depends on a people’s habits, customs, and ethics—attributes that can be shaped only indirectly through conscious political action and must otherwise be nourished through an increased awareness and respect for culture” (Fukuyama, 1995, p. 5). Such “conscious political action” is the obligation of governments and citizens alike, and it constitutes the strongest efforts of societies that strive for social cohesion.

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