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## POLITICS & INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS | CRITICAL ESSAY

# “Missing link” or missed opportunity? Bourdieu, agency and the political economy of the social capital initiative

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**Abstract:** This paper looks to bring a fresh perspective to bear on the World Bank's engagement with the concept of social capital. Drawing on the work of Bourdieu, it examines the representations of agency portrayed in the World Bank's Social Capital Initiative (SCI). Its guiding premise is that all such projects carry with them agential ideals and fixed assumptions around human nature that can in turn be used to discern their ideological disposition. Viewed primarily as an operation of power, a critical stance is taken on the Bank's representation of social capital and the way in which it constructs agency in line with an economic worldview. This paper situates the SCI within an historical context before bringing analysis to bear on its foundational literature. Despite purporting to revolve around key “social” themes, it is found that many of the representations provided serve primarily to reinforce a dated liberal-economic abstraction of agency.

**Subjects:** Development Studies, Environment, Social Work, Urban Studies; Politics & International Relations; Development Studies; Philosophy

**Keywords:** development; World Bank; social capital; Bourdieu; agency; agential



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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Edmund O'Donovan is currently a teacher, trainer and lecturer based in China's Heilongjiang province. His professional and academic background is primarily in the International Development Sector, holding a Philosophy BA (Durham), Linguistics MA (Liverpool) and a Development Studies MSc (Birkbeck). His wider areas of academic interest include educational philosophy, personhood and cultural bias, particularly in the area of language testing for which he recently received a British Council award.

His latest paper takes a retrospective look at the Social Capital Initiative's base, seeking to uncover its ideological underpinnings by examining the agential narratives that run through it. It may be of interest to academics and critics wishing to take a more bottom-up, philosophical approach to the political economy behind the preferred development concepts of the day.

### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Since its re-emergence in the 1990s, Social Capital has proved an interesting and controversial topic in the field of International Development. As a concept, it appealed to a wide range of development stakeholders across the political spectrum, one that had the potential to incorporate “social” concerns into the more economic world-view favoured by the political establishment. This interest in social capital gave rise to the “Social Capital Initiative”, tasked with investigating the development potential of the concept. This paper explores whether social capital was a meaningful common ground in development's “battle of ideas”. It does this by looking at the way such projects embody ideals about correct or “approved” human behaviour and uses them as ideological indicators. It takes a bottom-up approach, viewing the “stories” provided throughout the Initiative's literature as “parables” or “lessons” in certain forms of behaviour.

## 1. Introduction

Social capital is a contested concept. It has simultaneously been characterised as a “missing link” in development theory (Grootaert, 1998, p. 1), an empty exhortation that promises more than it can deliver (Portes, 1998, p. 2) and a key target for appropriation in development’s “battlefield of knowledge” (Bebbington, Guggenheim, Olson, & Woolcock, 2004, p. 37; Fine, 2003, p. 588; Harriss & de Renzio, 1997, pp. 75–97, Smith & Kulynych, 2002, p. 174). The World Bank’s interest in the term drove the Social Capital Initiative, a project tasked with “defining, monitoring and measuring social capital” (World Bank, 1998, p. 1) that ran from 1996 to 2001.

This article seeks to better understand the SCI and the events preceding it. It is primarily interested in uncovering the Initiative’s epistemological and ideological foundations, the boundaries of what the Bank deems “knowable” about social capital and how these choices are essentially ideologically engendered. This will be done specifically in relation to the range of literature it draws upon to make its case and its treatment of the more politically-challenging scholars therein, notably Pierre Bourdieu. Agency, and how it is represented, will play a key role throughout as an ideological referent. The guiding premise of this paper is that analysis of how these assumptions play out may provide a means of cutting to the core of such initiatives and identifying the ideological position from which they are pitched.

### 1.1. Clarifying “agency”

Agency is a difficult concept to tie down. It extends beyond autonomy and “freedom of action” to encompass temporal considerations of habit (the “iterative” dimension) and aspiration (the “projective” dimension) (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). Whereas some have chosen to distinguish between the rule-governed “actor” and the more self-determined “agent” (Karp, 1986, p. 137), the very notion of “autonomous” agency detached from structural constraint is a problematic one. Therefore, to allow for structural influence, this paper will employ a basic working definition of “the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn, 2001, p. 112).

Agency has been conceived and constructed in a great variety of ways. From classical notions of the atomised, rational individual grounded in Enlightenment thought, through to more resistive forms of subaltern agency, the concept takes numerous forms. The task of detailing this range lies beyond the remit of the current article. However, there is one approach to agency that is particularly pertinent to the World Bank’s narrative around poverty at the turn of the century, that found in the work of Sen (1992, 1999a, 1999b). Through his “capability approach” Sen lays out a multidimensional view of agency that assigns a deeper, more subjective significance to freedom and autonomy. Rather than grounding the assessment of a choice or action in terms of its rationality, Sen allows for the pursuit of goals that the individual has reason to value. Irrespective of whether these goals are achieved in practise or rational in nature, it is the process of enacting one’s will that is also of intrinsic value. Multidimensional agency is therefore self-determined and consequently defies concise definition. It is best described as a “freeing up” or “expansion” of the agency concept, one that disengages the individual from normative expectations of behaviour.

Of agency’s many constructions, it was Sen’s approach that was to be opening embraced by the World Bank, particularly in relation to the theme of *multidimensional poverty* (powerlessness, voicelessness and vulnerability) around which its 2000/01 World Development Report (WDR) was centred (“*Attacking Poverty*”, World Bank, 2001).

### 1.2. Reflexivity of structure and agency

Despite being grounded in philosophical debates of free will and determinism that date back centuries, the following outline of the structure-agency debate is rooted in a particular era of social theory. The relationship between agency and structure is a complex one that is, to varying degrees, reflexive and inter-influential. In this respect, the perspectives of Foucault (1982, 1983, 1998), Giddens (1982, 1984) and Bourdieu (1977, 1990) will be considered.

Foucault's early work is best characterised by the problematisation of the very notion of agency as a category in itself (1982, pp. 777–796, 1998, pp. 92–102). The individual has little substantive a priori existence until it is reified as an effect of power. Foucault reconceptualises power as pervasive, diffuse and opaque. Such power does not so much permeate social relations from without but constitutes them from their foundations upwards. Shifts in discursive practice thus reconfigure the very ontology of the agent. The way in which Foucault conceptualises power necessitates that there are a variety of social institutions that disseminate discursive practices specific to their interests. Thus the agent is a construct born of many competing and overlapping narratives with varying degrees of sway over this process of social construction. Whereas Foucault conditionally acknowledges the resistive power of the individual, this power is chronically mitigated by the disciplinary structures acting upon it. Such power “categorises the individual, attaches him to his own identity [and] imposes a law of truth on him” (1983, p. 212).

Giddens instead seeks to reconcile structure and agency in a more reflexive way. His theory of Structuration acknowledges the capacity of the agent to modify social structures that in turn hold sway over agential action by setting the contextual framework of shared rules, norms and boundaries within which they occur (Giddens, 1982, pp. 1–36, 1984, pp. 1–34). These frameworks cannot be considered as external structures that constrain agents from without as they are derived from, and reinforced by, widespread repetitive agential action. There is thus an implicit and often inadvertent public consensus around the utility of the structures in place. These structures are in regular flux but no matter how powerful or embedded they become, the potential to scale them back lies with the actions of the many, who can exercise a “dialectic of control” over them. Giddens conceives of agency over structure as being that which has primacy. Structures are the product of collective agency and exist by grace of the actions of a specific audience. They exist “as the instantiation of rules in the situated activities of agents” (Giddens, 1984, p. 17).

In contrast, Bourdieu's theory of practice (1977, pp. 72–87, pp. 96–144) conceives of agents as being largely oblivious contributors to the perpetuation of the structures and discourses that shape their lives. Bourdieu articulates his theory through a set of pre-existing foundational terms that he redefines in line with his own vision of how structure and agency interrelate. Key among these are “field” (the abstract stage within which agents are situated), “habitus” (the agent's subjective internalisation of the social world and their place within it) and “doxa” (the set of embedded norms and dispositions that take on a “self-evidence” within a given field). Agents perpetuate and renew the structural forces within the fields that shape their lives without necessarily being aware of or complicit in them. This concept of *doxa* in particular, and the projection of “self-evidence” are to be central themes of this paper when applied to what are pitched as normal, expected or ideal notions of human behaviour. Through repeated appeal to (or neglect of) set character traits, long-term projects such as the SCI have the capacity to construct an abstraction of agency that is rarely explicitly endorsed but demonstrably present throughout.

### 1.3. Social capital overview

Whereas the concept of social capital has been anticipated by theorists that significantly predate the development field (notably Hanifan [1920], Hume [1984] and Durkheim [1997]), it is the more recent explicit formulations of it that both this paper, and the SCI, are concerned with. Social capital started garnering academic interest in the late 1970s, primarily through the work of Bourdieu (1986, pp. 241–258), before it was propelled into the spotlight of policy-making circles by the insights of Coleman (1988, pp. 95–121, 1990, pp. 300–318) and Putnam (1993a, pp. 35–42, 1993b, pp. 163–186) in the 1990s.

It is to Bourdieu we turn first. In his clearest articulation of capital (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 241–258), he lays out his vision for a multidimensional expression of the term, one better equipped to speak of the social world than the reductive economic accounts that preceded it (Hayek, 2009; Marshall, 2009; Smith, 1937). Bourdieu's wider academic enterprise on capital is best summed up by his intention to uncover a unified “economy of practices” fit for a more contextual, fluid form of social analysis (Bourdieu, 1986).

He distinguishes between three forms of capital, social, economic and cultural, uniting them under a fourth he calls symbolic capital. Given that capital is both multidimensional and fluid in nature Bourdieu recognises the need to study *how* conversions from one form to another take place. Economic capital directly translates into currency and can be recognised in institutional forms such as property rights. Similarly, certain forms of cultural capital, whether ascribed or individually merited, have an indirect but real economic value that can be manifested through educational qualifications and other culturally-valid competencies. Social capital too can be economically converted through forms of class status and titles that denote prestige associated with (and thus perpetuating of) economic gain. For Bourdieu, social capital constitutes “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance” (ibid., p. 248). He refers specifically to group memberships that endow their members “... with the backing of the collectively-owned capital” (ibid., p. 251). The politics of social capital accumulation and the exclusivity that certain networks take on is a crucial consideration for Bourdieu. Such networks contain within themselves “the seeds of an embezzlement or misappropriation of the capital which they assemble” (ibid., p. 251).

The concept of symbolic capital helps to clarify this point and explain the underlying thrust behind Bourdieu’s general articulation of capital. It is “economic or political capital that is disavowed ... a ‘credit’ which, under certain conditions ... guarantees economic profits” (ibid., p. 262). It places the possession of capital firmly in a self-perpetuating, uneven and exclusive nexus of knowledge and power. It is this “economic or political capital” that determines the weight and distribution of all other forms of capital by conferring social and cultural status upon its bearers. Crucially, economic capital and its pursuit are the source of deep and cyclical social division and thus inequality. In contrast with the views that follow, it is not conceived of as an intrinsically empowering, enriching or “natural” endeavour.

With this in mind, we turn to the seminal contribution of Coleman, whose work *Foundations of Social Theory* (Coleman, 1990, pp. 300–318) outlined a markedly different understanding of the social capital concept than that espoused by Bourdieu. Highly influential across the social sciences, his work openly applies economic models to the social world. Rational Choice Theory in particular is appropriated towards sociological ends to explain the motivations behind action on the micro level. From this base can be built predictions of macro trends (“micro-to-macro transition”). Implicitly the “rational” individual that is both economically and socially legible is key here to understanding societal trends and planning social interventions.

Social capital is defined here by whatever associational purpose it performs in a given situation: it is “a capital asset for the individual ... defined by its function ... not a single entity but a variety of different entities [that] consist of some aspect of social structure and facilitate certain actions of individuals who are within the structure” (Coleman, 1990, p. 302). Thus social capital refers to associational resources born primarily of social structures that individuals can tap into and profit from. It is a productive, facilitative, even transformative, public good that can be understood functionally. Coleman’s account of the structural prerequisites that feed into the cultivation of social capital has no place for differential power as a problematising factor. The extent to which this articulation of social capital, and his rationalist approach to human agency, underpin the SCI is an area of discussion to which we will return.

While swiftly gaining acclaim for its scope and rigour in the field of sociology, Coleman’s work was not immediately responsible for the marked increase in interest in social capital during the mid 1990s. Heavily reliant upon it was that of Putnam, whose best-selling book *Making Democracy Work* (1993a, pp. 163–186) is widely credited as being the catalyst for the term’s explosion in usage. Putnam’s findings draw on a data-set analysing the performance of twenty Italian local authorities over a thirty-year period. Despite being structurally similar, these regions were disparate in terms of effectiveness and constituent satisfaction. Putnam’s argument is that these differences are born of embedded variations in associational life that date back generations. Such discrepancies can, it is claimed, be both clarified and countered by a better understanding of social capital.

For Putnam social capital refers to the “features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam, 1993b, p. 2). As such, it has the potential to improve the ability to acquire human/physical capital on the micro level while also facilitating macro developmental goals of economic growth, institutional probity and democracy. Putnam pointedly pitches this conception of social capital to development economists in the hope that it will add an important and previously overlooked dimension of socio-economic analysis to the field (Putnam, 1993b, p. 3). This new dimension is again, something of political vacuum, stripped of the necessary considerations of political polarity rather than being strictly apolitical. Direct discussion of political power, inequality and division play little role in Putnam’s analysis. His work simultaneously, and some have claimed contradictorily, calls for steadfast communal solidarity alongside increased competition in the marketplace (Harriss, 2002, Navarro, 2002). The potential of this articulation of social capital was not lost on the neoliberal policy-making circles of the day and his work features heavily throughout the SCI.

## 2. Situating the social capital initiative

### 2.1. A theory of practice

Bourdieu’s work views both subjective (“phenomenological”) and objective (“theoretical”) forms of knowledge as restrictive zero-sum accounts of the social world that embody similar fallacies of representation. They assume that that which they describe is bounded, systematic and legible, subservient to rules either prescribed by an external structural framework or conferred by the viewer upon the object in question. Bourdieu’s assertion is that, rather than trying to uncover the internal logic of “the object”, analysis is better focused on elucidating the sets of presuppositions that feed into *how* and *why* representation of that object plays out in a certain way. He therefore seeks to ground the social universe in “practice”, a form of analysis that looks beyond the subject/object distinction to incorporate considerations of power, timing, socio-political context, doxa and the changing nature of each. Therefore, an object, act or agent can only begin to be understood through the lens of its wider accomplishment, enabling environment or process of “becoming”.

Both Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice and his wider intellectual enterprise can be understood as a process of “radical contextualisation” (Johnson, 1993, p. 9) that can be used to situate agents, symbols, artefacts and projects within a nexus of historical trajectories and power relations. In line with this process of contextualisation this paper will seek to historicise the SCI within development discourse and identify evidence of recurring power dynamics within the many representations of agency it provides.

The shorthand history of development is one typically characterised by the major development paradigms being assigned a largely arbitrary “decade” of theoretical dominance. Loosely conceived, this sequence can be charted from modernisation, through basic needs and dependency, to neoliberalism and then on to more “multidimensional” conceptions of human development. Whereas this crude compartmentalism does not offer any comprehensive account of how the field has evolved, it does provide a framework against which the SCI can be brought into relief.

The period spanning the mid-eighties to the early nineties is particularly significant here as it embodies key considerations for how we view social capital and the importance afforded it by the World Bank. The following section will proceed to contextualise the SCI in relation to these developments.

### 2.2. Impasse in development theory

The impasse in development theory finds its roots in the mid-eighties, notably through the work of Booth (1985, pp. 761–787) though there was a characteristic lag between this initial academic acknowledgement and any broader recognition of the problems the field faced. Whereas the hallmarks of this impasse and its underlying causes have been the subject of debate (Leys, 1996; Pieterse, 2010; Schuurman, 2002), such commentaries do share common observations. Significant among them is the waning of the two meta-narratives that had driven the field up until that point,

generally characterised as Modernisation and Marxism. The interplay between these broad ideologies gave the field momentum, a sense of (albeit conflicted) purpose and, amongst the left at least, a commitment to rigorous critique and consequent renewal (Leys, 1996).

However, development as a material enterprise was undermined by the inescapable fact that the “lost decade” of the 1980s (Forsyth, 2005, p. 661) had brought alarming increases in unemployment, landlessness and poverty (Schuurman, 2002, p. 13). Disillusion with development policy and practice was accompanied by deep-seated fissures within the theoretical foundations needed to catalyse change. Postmodern critiques were increasingly brought to bear on development, a particularly susceptible field given its normative base and multidisciplinary nature. In terms of the wider objectives of this paper, it is the implications this impasse had for the political economy of the field that are of greatest significance. It is not helpful to employ an un-nuanced dictionary definition of the term “impasse” in the political context. Inferences of a “stalemate” or “standoff” situation have a neutrality to them that detracts from the fact that theoretical impasse in no way necessitates an ideological deadlock in practice. To represent the impasse as a “dead space” would be to depoliticise development at an important juncture in its history. The dominance of neoliberalism before, during and after this period coupled with the fact that the left traditionally relies more heavily upon a vibrant and critical body of theory (Leys, 1996) suggests that this impasse did not affect development evenly across the ideological spectrum. On the contrary, in a shift that would mirror the end of the Cold War, conceptually neoliberalism was now unopposed by a cohesive and integrated ideological whole. Relating this back to Bourdieu, neoliberalism as a structural force can be seen here to take on (or reinforce) a “self-evident” *doxic* role in the shaping of development discourse.

### **2.3. The end of history**

The physical manifestation of this shift came in the form of the velvet revolution and the demise of the USSR as a global superpower. This sequence of events heralded the supposed “End of History” (Fukuyama, 1989), “... the triumph of the West ... an unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism ... and the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism.” (ibid., p. 3). This end of history was not the death of ideology in the postmodern sense but the end of *struggle between* ideologies, one having won out over the other.

It is particularly telling that the “history” of which Fukuyama speaks is conceived of as a “single, coherent, evolutionary process” (Fukuyama, 1993, p. 12), one that openly embraced the teleological aspects of social science that had been so roundly criticised during the impasse. In light of the considerable success and influence of his thesis this point serves to consolidate the impression that economic liberalism has an immunity from, or at least disregard for, the abstract critiques that so undermined the left. Fukuyama’s work is noteworthy for two further reasons. Firstly, it played an influential role in developing the World Bank’s articulation of social capital, enjoying citation in thirteen of the SCI’s twenty-four papers. Secondly, as is entailed by the full title of his revised work “The End of History *and the Last Man*” (1993), there is an important agential dimension to the privileging of economic liberalism above all other alternatives. Fukuyama’s “*Last Man*” stands alone as the very embodiment of a newly victorious [neo]liberal paradigm in which mankind is fulfilled and unfettered, both financially enabled by the market and politically empowered by the ballot box. In sharp contrast to Bourdieu, Fukuyama situates his “agent” not in an endogenous cycle of “becoming” but within the latter stages of a “natural” predetermined evolutionary process.

### **2.4. Beyond the Washington consensus**

Arguably the most important contextual layer against which to position the SCI is the shift from Washington to post-Washington consensus. The former, coined in Williamson (1990), was a crystallisation of the conventional wisdom that had formed around the dominance of economic liberalism in the 1980s. This combination of trade liberalisation, macroeconomic stability, financial discipline, privatisation and deregulation had attracted near-unanimous approval amongst the policymakers of western governments and multilateral organisations.

Despite this dominant neoliberal paradigm being the target of considerable academic criticism, strikes and protests (Walton & Seddon, 1994), it was from within the Bank that reorientation came. Influenced both by the acknowledged failure of the old consensus and calls for a more a multidimensional approach, it was the then Bank President Joseph Stiglitz who attempted to instigate a shift in approach. His post-Washington consensus drew on Keynesian economics to argue for greater equity, welfare provision, state involvement, market regulation and global structural reform. The hitherto overlooked impact of social factors upon economic analysis became a new and important means of explaining market imperfections and legitimising non-market intervention towards economic ends (Bebbington et al., 2004, p. 36; Onis & Senses, 2005, p. 286). The embedded assumption was that “the social” was out of step with “the economic” and that the former must be reconfigured or better understood in order to “balance the market”.

### **2.5. Good governance agenda**

The impetus behind the World Bank’s Good Governance agenda came directly from the disintegration of the Soviet bloc and the questions this dramatic change in the political landscape raised about the probity and efficiency of state architecture (Demmers, Jilberto, & Hogenboom, 2004). Without doubt Good Governance, with its emphases on democracy, transparency, anti-corruption and accountability represented much that had the semblance of objective developmental worth. However, the minutiae of what is considered “good” governance in practice is, by necessity, formed around normative judgements that are ideologically engendered. Whereas these are characteristics that pertain to *how* a model state should be run on the macro-level, it is noteworthy that “ideal governance” embodies within it set notions of “ideal agency”. The transition from pre-modern subjects to modern citizens is of critical importance here. While this transition is not explicitly induced, it takes place in the form of representing the agent in a specific manner. With focus firmly upon macro notions of governance it is easy to lose sight of how shifts on this level entail a reframing of the notion of agency. Good governance necessitates endowing agents with a degree of citizenship, a concept that in turn carries with it elements of obedience, participation, voluntarism and a willingness to accept public duties and restraints in pursuit of the greater good. As in classical formulations of social contract (Locke, 1980; Rousseau, 2004) individual freedoms are tempered by individual responsibilities.

The Good Governance agenda prefigured the SCI in a number of other key ways. Advocating the links between open and sound institutions and economic development is a common aspect of both. The combined importance of bottom-up vertical bonds *with* government and horizontal associations *between* citizens is another shared characteristic. In the abstract, they both also located “underdevelopment” as a contained phenomenon bounded within the developing constituencies themselves. Just as the very need for a Good Governance agenda implicitly characterises the developing world as corrupt, inefficient and incapable of naturally following the West’s trajectory, so too did the social capital agenda imply that the associational activity needed to spark economic growth had been hitherto dysfunctional. International trade, loan conditionality, social justice, geographical location, climate and historical context rarely have a central position in these debates.

### **2.6. Civil society agenda**

As with Good Governance, increased interest in Civil Society ran roughly parallel with the SCI. Defined as an expansive public sphere in which a “collective of conflicting, interdependent and inter-influential organisations” interact (van Rooy, 1998, p. 30), the scope for interpretation it provides is vast. Whereas the Bank charts its involvement in civil society back to the 1970s, recognition and praise of its potential towards developmental ends markedly gathered pace in the mid-1990s (*ibid*). Engagement with NGOs (non-governmental organisations) underwent a fourfold increase as civil society consultation became an expected prerequisite for projects conducted under the Bank’s auspices. Though pitched as a more efficient, participatory and context-aware shift in the Bank’s approach this commitment to civil society has been interpreted as a strategic response to criticism of structural adjustment (Hoebink, 2000; Leal & Opp, 1998; Rahman, 1995). Inducing the expansion of NGOs and voluntary organisations necessarily encroaches upon any given state’s capacity to

compete in the same arena. The momentum behind “rolling back” or “franchising out” the state (Wood, 1997) was sustained by the natural tendency NGOs had for identifying gaps within the limitless remit of poverty reduction and “scaling up” to fill them (Wils, 1995, p. 53). Furthermore, as recipients of significant external funding their services and wider mission could be co-opted with relative ease by donor expectations and conditions of further support.

Again, the importance of social capital and its compatibility with the Bank’s wider agenda are evidenced here. Social capital proved a valuable conduit between the economic and the social, offering a means of codifying the associational practices of an amorphous public sphere that had previously been considered either too elusive to define with precision or simply dismissed as brute fact. Aside from mapping onto the SCI both chronologically and conceptually, the civil society agenda offered a reiteration of the agential themes evidenced above. From the neoliberal perspective the rhetoric of civil society and participation speaks of responses to poverty as needing to be “locally generated” and “owned” by developing constituencies themselves (Mommen, 2009, p. 7). The inferred delegation of power at the heart of the agenda entails a confidence in the capacity of local people to self-regulate against the backdrop of an implicitly minimal state. Furthermore, the agenda’s strong “service provision” theme downplayed civil society’s role as a forum for political mobilisation. Far from being a vibrant milieu of grassroots organisations it faced the prospect of being reduced to an aggregate of discrete private interests, a network of “clients”, “stakeholders” and “service users” collaborating and competing in a forum that can at best be described as an annexe to the marketplace. By extension the agents that comprise it are monochrome, apolitical, utility-maximising economic actors that, having had their rationality recognised, have now become more legible to “rational” economic analysis (Bergeron, 2005, pp. 30–68).

### **2.7. Bringing “the Social” in**

The contextualisation provided in this section has sought to go beyond setting the SCI against a static historical background and instead consider the political and agential themes flowing into and through it. In so doing, we are reminded that economic liberalism’s victory in the war of ideas necessitated a move away from the brash triumphalism of Fukuyama towards a more subtle phase of honing and proliferating its worldview.

This is particularly telling when assessing the bold claim central to the SCI, that social capital constitutes the “missing link” in international development (Grootaert, 1998, p. 1). Such language has a tone that suggests a theoretical *breakthrough* and, more significantly perhaps, a tacit *break with* a controversial and discredited past.

It is striking precisely how well social capital meets so many of the Bank’s political needs in a conspicuously functional manner. It simultaneously explained a range of issues from the disintegration of the Soviet bloc to the stunted economic performance of the developing world, while also going some way to appeasing disquiet both from sections of the Bank’s internal hierarchy and the academic field. Furthermore, a host of approved policy emphases, interlocking agendas and buzzwords find expression within (and are thus legitimated by) the social capital concept. It seems all but the most misguided of past Bank initiatives not only remain intact but are consolidated therein. Harris’s makes a particularly apt point in this respect, when, in reference to the World Bank, he notes: “We might almost argue that if the idea of social capital had not already had some currency ... it would have had to be invented” (Harris, 2002, p. 113).

### **2.8. The bibliographic base of the initiative**

It is with this backdrop in mind that we, through an agential lens, examine how the SCI represents academic consensus around social capital and its development potential. Its literature review purports to provide a summary of contemporary (ca. 1999) and past theorising around the concept of social capital, aiming to describe, with a view to utilising, the field’s best “approaches and implementation strategies” (Feldman & Assaf, 1999, p. 1).

The review is lengthy and many of the agendas outlined in the above contextualisation are strongly evidenced therein. Wide-scale studies focusing on civil society and good governance (Bates, 1996; Esman & Uphoff, 1984; North, 1990; Olson, 1997; Tandler, 1997) abound alongside a numerous macroeconomic cross-country comparisons (Barro, 1989; De Haan & Siermann, 1996; Hirschman, 1984; Klitgaard & Fedderke, 1995; Knack & Keefer, 1997; Stiglitz, 1996; World Bank, 1993). Aside from the agential subtext of the first two, these macro studies are not well-suited to portraying the stages or of individual interaction this paper seeks to examine. Rather, the focus is upon smaller-scale examples, singled out for inclusion, that contain set scenarios, forums or arenas of action that have the capacity to represent agency on the micro or meso levels. These examples will be treated as individual arenas of (inter)action that are used to constrain or amplify specific traits of the agent(s). Collectively it is hoped they can give substance to an “archetypal agent” or form of agency that can speak of the ideological underpinnings of the Initiative itself.

The Initiative’s literary base contains some interesting examples in this regard, the first of which is taken from de Soto’s “The Other Path: The Invisible Revolution in the Third World” (De Soto, 1989). De Soto’s celebrated and extensive study details the scale and complexity of the networks that comprise Peru’s informal economy. Its growth is charted over a forty year period to a point where it now accounts for close to 40% of the nation’s gross domestic product. The author commends this thriving, unregulated and resourceful marketplace, seeing within it the seeds of an enterprising economic order capable of transforming Peru’s poor development record. He argues an opt-out on this scale represents a revolution, not against the formal market, but against the corrupt and bloated state bureaucracies that hinder access to it. As an openly right-wing economist de Soto prescribes decentralisation, deregulation and procedural simplification on an unprecedented scale in a bid to integrate the Peruvian informal and formal economies.

What is remarkable about this text (and the inclusion of it) is the way it uses themes of inclusivity, egalitarianism and “revolution” commonly associated with more social-democratic or left-wing political dispositions. De Soto interprets the existence of a large and complex informal economy almost as if it were an endogenous rationalist social movement. This is not just a passive preference for an open market but an overwhelming “social” groundswell in favour of a market that serves the people and not the state. De Soto effectively uses public willingness to disengage with a corrupt and inefficient state as an evidential base from which to further a small-state ideology. In doing so, he characterises “the agent” as an enterprising actor who creates economic spaces and opportunity where none had previously existed, spaces through which rational choice and comparative advantage can be exercised freely. In a field that lacks an open formal market, agents cannot help but mobilise together towards economic ends. It is, in effect, how they “naturally act” when state regulation is stripped away. Subverting the prescriptivism developmental interventions are so often criticised for, de Soto pitches neoliberal reform as a solution so “self-evident” that it is being actively yearned for from below.

The review closes simply with a direct quote: “The real remedy is to recognize the property and labor of those whom formality excludes” (De Soto, 1989 [in Feldman & Assaf, 1999], p. 14). Interestingly these heavy emphases on both the recognition of private property and, more specifically, free use of that which one has produced are prerequisite components of the classical economic agency grounded in Enlightenment thought. Whereas the language and tone of de Soto’s work is far from orthodox for a text of its kind, its ideological persuasion and lineage are clear.

The same suspicion of the state’s role in development is evident in the inclusion of Rose’s “Russia as an Hour Glass Society” (Rose, 1995). Analysing the results of the fourth annual survey of transformation in post-communist societies (New Russian Barometer), Russian society is likened to an hourglass in which a rich political and social elite preside over a wider population with very few meaningful intermediary institutions linking the two. The base of this “hourglass” is held together by a nexus of “dense horizontal networks of friends and relatives” (Feldman & Assaf, 1999), one better able to cater to the population’s everyday needs than the state services in which they have no trust.

These observations went on to inform Rose's own Working Paper for the Initiative, "Getting thing done in an Anti-Modern Society" (Rose, 1998), in which he investigates how associational networks are used strategically or as coping mechanisms for dealing with a Soviet legacy of bureaucracy and corruption. It is noted that Russia, being predominantly literate, urban-centric and interlinked, has an appearance of modernity that belies its chronic deficiencies. State services such as health, housing and education cannot be efficiently or fairly accessed without recourse to informal alternatives. Bribery, self-subsistence, informal borrowing, cajoling of officials and utilising social connections combine to support Russians in "getting things done". An extensive repertoire of access points to these "second economies" and "second polities" is needed to maintain even the most modest standard of living in such a society. Rose argues that the norms and values driving this activity flow directly from a dysfunctional statist culture residual from the Soviet era. He concludes that "the immediate need is not to change the values and attitudes of the... population; it is to change the way the country is governed" (p. 20).

Whether in the form of emphases on good governance and civil society, or more dated ones of Rostovian modernisation and Soviet critique, this paper displays a great deal that suggests a liberal-economic bias. Whereas top-down reform or even regime change is openly recommended the reorientation of defective behaviour patterns is implied as a logical secondary measure, the need for such reconfiguration being pressing but not *immediately* necessary. In terms of agency, Rose gauges Russia against the Weberian ideal-type of "the *modern society*", thereby juxtaposing the western "citizen" against the post-soviet "subject". Interestingly, the distinction between developed and undeveloped is not often invoked. In place of a "primitive" or "*un-modern other*" is the "anti-modern", a state that is resistant or even hostile to "progress". Decades of closed governance and oppressive state bureaucracy have retarded free agency, creating a society that privileges horizontal associations over vertical ones and exclusive advantages over mutually-beneficial collective action. Such an unbalanced civil society necessarily limits displays of enterprise to acts of mere survival or the playing out of coping strategies. Implicitly agency is compromised or defective when deprived of the freedom, opportunity and interconnectivity provided by the market "*mega-network*".

A more abstract, but equally functional example can be found in the SCI's inclusion of Ostrom's "Governing the Commons: Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action" (Ostrom, 1990). Here the author seeks to resolve the problems associated with environmental common pool resource management. She engages particularly with the abstract models, games and set-plays that undermine the probability of efficient collective action taking place. *The Tragedy of the Commons* (overconsumption through under-regulation), *The Prisoner's Dilemma* (excessive individualism) and *The Logic of Collective Action* (indolence, ambivalence or ignorance of joint benefit) are characterised as deficient in the way they describe collective agency. While they raise some valid points, these models are unhelpful in that they present us with individuals who are "trapped in static situations without the ability to change the rules affecting their incentives" (p. 182). What is needed, Ostrom claims, is an approach that recognises the capacity communities have to mobilise themselves effectively.

Ostrom's work is used primarily to debunk a series of concerns around human interaction with the environment and each other. These abstract models raise questions about the fairness, sustainability and efficiency of common pool resource management and potentially undermine policy orientation towards deregulation and community-lead service provision. Ostrom's place within the review can therefore be seen to serve a function in line with the Initiative's wider agenda, again brining some strong agential undertones to the fore. The ability to *break out of or transcend* "static situations" and "change the rules" that govern and structure one's environment are particularly interesting emphases. The reader is reminded that individuals can and should take ownership of their condition regardless of the edicts of circumstance. An agential will to overcome is given primacy over the restraints that structure their fields. This control over one's surroundings is accompanied by an inner discipline needed to overcome one's baser nature in pursuit of the greater good. Greed, selfishness and idleness are exposed as traits born of short-termism that are rendered invalid as rational choices in the long-run.

Variations of these themes run through the contribution of “The Economics of Rotating Savings and Credit Associations” (Besley, Coate, & Loury, 1993), though with a stronger economic bent. In this text, the authors use economic game theory to study the impact and performance of “ROSCAs” in a variety of settings. ROSCAs are small self-selecting partnerships whose members consent to take on the collective risks and benefits of saving together. They operate as structured yet informal financial institutions that allow their members to access the market when, individually, their poor creditworthiness would not permit them to do so. A key feature of the success and prevalence of ROSCAs is the concept of “social collateral”. In the absence of physical assets individual members rely on both their own reputations and their knowledge of the circumstances and character of their fellow members to secure a stable saving environment. Thus the twin threat of social ostracism and exclusion from subsequent programs provide powerful incentives not to default.

It is hard to imagine a more explicit economic reification of “the social” than that provided by “social collateral”, a concept through which associations are literally “cashed in” to secure saving, borrowing or trade opportunities. The “rotating” nature of these savings and credit associations is also noteworthy as the individual schemes are short-term in nature but the groups that partake in them typically stay together through several “cycles”. The ranking of members within these associations, along with their accompanying duties, fluctuate in line with their reliability and performance. Thus, through a process of regular review, weekly meetings and social coercion the economic discipline of the agent is built up over a sustained period. Reinforcing this point are the bidding processes that are used in the formation of some ROSCAs. Unsuccessful prospective groups necessarily have to keep refining their pitch, membership or funding intentions in order to put together an approved proposal. The manner in which such associations are formed dictates that they carry with them a required skill-set and a set schedule that combine to attune their members to liberal-economic doxa. Far from reforming the economy in line with the demonstrable need for fair access, it is the behaviour of the agent that has to be reconfigured for market interaction.

As an exemplar of social capital in action, the topic of microfinance is used as an important referent throughout the Initiative, which dedicates a separate literature review to its discussion (van Bastelaer, 2000). Microfinance essentially revolves around an entrepreneurial model of an agent “... who, with the help of micro-credit, becomes self-employed, owns private property ... and sell[s] labour on the market” (Karim, 2008, p. 14). Whatever broader conceptions of agency and personal development that can be read into this, it is clear that they are bound up in and subservient to the pursuit of petty capital. Whether through ownership, interaction with the market or the privileging of economic ends over social ones, the microfinance example strongly reinforces many of this paper’s key themes.

The potential microfinance programs have to orientate the agent towards an economic mindset is strong. Drawing on Jain (1996, p. 83), the review posits that microfinance models primarily function as a means of “foster[ing] a culture wherein both the members and functionaries follow the Bank’s norms as a matter of routine or cultural habit” (van Bastelaer, 2000, p. 16). It seems counter-intuitive that the use of these group associations to promote “the repetition of identical behaviour ... week after week, fifty-two times a year” (van Bastelaer, 2000 citing Jain, 1996, p. 83) can complement efforts to enhance pre-existing reserves of social capital. Indeed, it is more indicative of approved forms of association (and thus agency) being commended above all others whether they are locally generated or not.

Within this ability to engender financial discipline is the capacity to influence the manner in which judgement is passed on others. Given that their clients have strong vested interests in the actions of fellow members, microfinance programs rely on them to fulfil a monitoring role. Stakeholders are not just economic agents influenced by the programs to which they are adjoined but are now agents of said programs, engaged in a process of constant peer-review of which they are also the subject (van Bastelaer, 2000, p. 6). The rules and criteria by which they judge other members (with whom their relationship had previously been *social*) can now be seen to have an economic orientation to them. “Development”, both through the lens of microfinance programs and the eyes of group members,

becomes inextricably linked to the accumulation of capital. Not only does this detach this representation of agency from any sense of intrinsic human value but it also re-enacts the deserving/undeserving poor dichotomy characteristic of Enlightenment constructions of the underprivileged agent (Wilson, 2007, p. 127). Whereas “replaying” successful past collaborations or enforcing monitoring roles gives social capital a certain cumulative strength it must be recognised that the repetition of such behaviour is, if externally encouraged or instigated, essentially a process of economic normalisation. All forms of agency have an iterative or “iterational” component to them (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, p. 971). They are not merely confined to the actions we are capable of but also encompass those acts we habitually “choose”. Any such move to interpret or reconfigure associational networks in a manner that accentuates their economic potential can thus be seen to exert a doxic influence over the agent.

### **2.9. Treatment of the academic “field”**

A broader overview of the SCI literature reviews raises a number of concerns and inconsistencies. Whereas Bourdieu’s “Forms of Capital” (1986) is reviewed, the entry is among the shortest and least detailed of all texts considered. Within the Initiative Bourdieu is lauded alongside Putnam and Coleman as one of the three seminal theorists to have brought “new conceptual and analytical elements” to bear on social capital (Pantoja, 2000, p. 16), yet overall his input is treated as peripheral and stripped of its political implications. Beyond his entry in the literature review, Bourdieu is mentioned in the body of only one further Working Paper (*ibid*) and has footnote citations in another (Paldam & Svenden, 1999, p. 4, 15). In sharp contrast, both Putnam and Coleman get mentions in all but two of the twenty-four papers.

Casting the net wider, it becomes apparent that all but five of the authors covered (Coate, de Hann, Siermann, Etzioni and Hirshman) enjoy more citations than Bourdieu. Clearly we cannot categorically equate citation with influence but it is a useful referent in showing that Bourdieu’s status as a highly influential thinker on social capital is not born out in the research itself. Any thorough account of his work opens up spaces within the social capital debate that have the capacity to profoundly undermine the SCI’s articulation of the concept.

This unevenness of representation raises questions about the World Bank’s role as a *producer* of knowledge and a *contributor* to the academic arena that it portrays as independent. The act of founding “new” research upon academia that is in accord with, but “detached” from, the Initiative’s conclusions performs a reinforcing role that adds a veneer of objectivity to its findings. In a manner that appeals to Bourdieusian “theoretical knowledge”, it speaks of a belief that there is an internal logic to social capital and that consensus exists around how this logic plays out in practice. However, the nature of academia decrees that authors, institutions and texts are highly inter-influential, the boundaries between them being not only in flux but porous. In keeping with his wider intellectual enterprise, Bourdieu’s “*Homo Academicus*” (Bourdieu, 1988, pp. 73–127) is necessarily bound up in power relations, status hierarchies and institutional networks of patronage.

This need to qualify academic contributions within their context is an important one that carries with it implications for our assessment of the SCI’s literature review. Analysis of the development field conducted in the Initiative’s wake shows that close to 20% of academic literature on social capital was published or commissioned by the World Bank (Englebert, 2001, p. 10). Whereas this might not seem noteworthy given the volume of material the Bank publishes, it is significant considering the negligible interest it showed in social capital prior to 1996. In the space of under five years and from a very low base the Bank produced more empirical research on social capital than any other major institution to have engaged with the concept. Relating this to the SCI literature review, the fact that “*recentness of publication*” is used as one of only two key criteria for selecting the texts (Feldman & Assaf, 1999, p. 1) immediately narrows the literary field into a period within which the Bank’s influence over the concept was greater than at any previous point. It is therefore little surprise that approximately a third of the twenty-four working papers that comprise the Initiative are written by contributors to the literature review. Nor is it unexpected that the two bodies of work combine so seamlessly to demonstrate an empirical link between social capital and economic development.

Of note here is that the World Bank's position as a producer of knowledge gives it the capacity to carve out enclaves within the academic arena that buttress its agenda. Its prestige, personnel, wealth and resource capabilities enable it to shuttle between the various forms of capital, making conversions as circumstances dictate. The Bank has a degree of control over capital flow in all its guises. To draw on Bourdieu, it possesses a wealth of *symbolic capital*, reserves of disguised or "disavowed" credit (and thus power) that can be brought into play to meet political needs. When viewed in this light, the very act of selecting or commissioning academic staff has implications for research independence. Such choices inevitably exclude as well as endorse, furthering both individual careers and institutional agendas at the expense of others (Wade, 2001, p. 203). Furthermore, these relationships are necessarily hidden from view and only partially surface when discord within the Bank spills out into the public domain (the resignations of Stiglitz and Kanbur being excellent high-profile examples [ibid., p. 209]). It is reasonable to surmise that alongside the Bank's ability to enshrine set representations of "the agent" in its own literature lies an ability to compromise critical agency both within its internal hierarchy and the wider academic field.

Literature reviews draw up the margins of further discussion and help qualify the need for fresh contributions to the field. The reviews clearly establish a highly favourable narrative around the utility of social capital while offering only piecemeal accounts of critical literature. Consistently, civil society and the marketplace that are portrayed as the drivers of developmental change. In sharp contrast, the state is viewed as an impediment to progress and in need of "rolling back". Hallmarks of neoliberal policy preferences such as decentralisation (particularly in relation to service provision) and structural reform are recurrent themes. Implicit throughout the review is that it is insufficient to encourage economic and political "best practice" on the macro-level but that the attitudes underpinning such reforms have to be present in microcosm within the individuals of the developing constituency in question.

Just as the Bank's enduring subservience to modernisation maps out a development trajectory grounded in the Western experience, so too can its representations of agency be seen to venerate the West's resourceful, disciplined, entrepreneurial and exclusive paragon of "Economic Man". The marginalising of discord within social capital discourse allows this exemplar to stand unopposed, thereby elevating it to a doxic position within the debate. This self-evidence comes not from any deliberative process that makes the case for economic agency over its alternatives, but from an elision of these alternatives from the Initiative's very foundations. Any such articulation of social capital relies on

### 3. Conclusion

This paper has sought to uncover some of the agential narratives that underpin the SCI and through them assess the ideological persuasion of the project. Bourdieu's Theory of Practice has been drawn on to show the Initiative as a product of power, time, need and context during a critical juncture in the political economy of development. Reflecting on the approach used, the Theory of Practice has been found to perform relatively well in the politicising role assigned it. It has been particularly interesting to use a theorist who is embraced from a distance and then marginalised within the SCI itself. Similarly, the "bottom-up" contention that agency can be used as an ideological indicator has been shown to have some merit. Whereas policy devices and the rhetoric they employ can be altered with relative ease, it seems far more difficult to reconfigure a fixed position on agency without overhauling the epistemological foundations of the project itself.

Through recourse to the SCI's underlying conception of human nature this paper has found that beneath repeated appeals to reciprocity, trust and community spirit lies a liberal-economic model of agency. The extent of this duality of representation leads us to believe that, viewed as a product of power and context, the Bank's courting of a more social approach was perhaps strategic, revisionary and largely superficial in nature. Any bridge between economic and social agendas that the simple pairing of "social" and "capital" suggests is compromised not by their fundamental incompatibility but by the setting and manner in which they are brought together. Particularly during a time of paradigmatic instability, the air of benign accord that is fostered between the two belies the doxic power of the latter over the former.

The examples chosen operate as discrete arenas of action, carrying with them approved traits that consistently pay dividends to those who demonstrate them or work towards their cultivation. Both their concise nature and instructive subtext allow these examples to function as though they were parables of economic man in which clear “winners” and “losers” are determined solely on the basis of their commitment to liberal-economic ideals. The recurring juxtaposition of dynamism with passivity, responsibility with carelessness and “the deserving” with “the undeserving” combine to effectively strip away agency from those who fail to use it “correctly”. By extension, this mode of representation raises questions for how the World Bank is viewed symbolically as a producer of knowledge. As arbiter of the nature and extent of these key competencies it occupies a benevolent authoritative position - as patron, as supervisor and as teacher.

While this paper has been critical of the extent to which the SCI is wed to rationalist notions of economic man, it has not sought to claim that the range of authors mentioned are wrong-headed in their individual analyses. Clearly views from across disciplines, generations and the political spectrum have played valid and important roles in elucidating the concept of social capital. Rather, it is the manner in which these views have been brought together, their selection and representation (and the marginalisation of those such as Bourdieu), that combine to depoliticise the topic.

Whereas we cannot hope to endorse any sense of “authentic” or “true” agency over and above all others, by way of conclusion, we can look to hold the SCI accountable to the ideals to which the World Bank aspired at the time of the Initiative’s close. During a period in which Sen’s multidimensionality had gained considerable prominence at the Bank (World Bank, 2001) the proliferation of such a reductive view of personhood is concerning. Misconceived notions of agency reveal inconsistencies within the Bank’s wider agenda while also having an impact upon the way it shapes the lives of the many it hopes to assist. The concept of social capital has indeed, pushed the “frontier[s] of what is speakable” within the Bank in favour of a marginally more socially-orientated agenda (Bebbington et al., 2004, p. 57) (though it has failed to maintain its buzzword status in the years since). However, such scant gains came at the expense of an impoverished view of human agency and an incomplete assessment of social capital’s development potential. Consequently, it is possible to view the way social capital is treated by the Bank as more of a missed opportunity than any “missing link” in development theory.

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