

Social Capital: The Case of Poland

Data opublikowania: 30.10.2014

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Problems of the development of social capital are crucial to analysing the potential of modern organisations. Social capital is usually defined terms of bonds, engagement, or trust.

Both books present a perspective of the research on social capital, but they treat the same conceptual category in different ways. Gajowiak's book aims to show the importance of the state in the process of social-capital building. Dudzikowa's research group, meanwhile, concentrates on analysing the role of the university within the science and technology development infrastructure in the same process of fostering social capital.

Gajowiak takes a qualitative research approach, using secondary data analysis, especially statistics and sociological reports. The main topic of her book is the specific situation of Poland during the a period of political and economic transition after 1989, especially in comparison to other European countries as well as other transition countries of Central and Eastern Europe. She defines the most important sources of social capital: the state, the education system, cultural values, and the family. However, in her opinion only the state can establish the appropriate framework for the development of bonds, relationships, and trust between social actors and groups. This claim seems to be insufficient and possibly controversial, but Gajowiak tries to explain why the most important changes in social capital are dependent on the state. We can accept these explanations with respect only to the first stage of the transformation in Poland, and not its later stages, because in my opinion they should take into account other organisations such as NGOs, self-government, independent media, or even corporations (especially for the members of the corporation).

Gajowiak's is an unusual approach, because there are many other concepts that reveal many other factors having important influences on social trust, such as the activity of NGOs or civil society. She indicates that the links and influences between variables are complicated and complex, and this is one reason why many hypotheses have existed in the social sciences.

Her main thesis about the prevailing role of the state in the process of social-capital creation is supported by strong arguments related to the last huge political and economic transformation in Poland. Gajowiak concentrates on the statistics and opinions related to the economic and political changes in Poland after 1989. In this case, especially in the first years of the transition, the use of the expression 'negative social capital' is appropriate. Many unfavourable phenomena, caused by the big political change, altered the life situation of the

people and worsened the economic conditions of households. Bitter reflections about reality, the future, and other people are effects of observing corruption, wild and unfair privatisation, and hyperinflation.

Social capital is difficult to measure as well as important to explaining the factors of socioeconomic development. Elements of social capital include characteristics such as networking, values, reciprocity, fellowship, activity, and relationships. Unfortunately, the author shows only one side of the problem - she examines actually the factors, which could destroy social capital - influence of privatisation and the free market. This could be treated as an advantage of the study, but nowadays Poland is undergoing economic growth and the factors, which were very important in the first period of political and economic transformation, form a very important background to the examined destruction of social capital. In addition, her thesis about lower social capital in Poland could be controversial, but she describes social groups and milieus related to the problem of lack of trust.

The Dudzikowa research group's report examines social capital using the example of the university as a type of science institution in Poland. The authors agree with Gajowskiak's main thesis of the lack of trust in Polish society. The book contains two parts. Chapters 1 through 5 present data, links, and interpretations of the research results, the effects of the longitudinal survey using the inquiry method on the research sample of 1,500 people (students of the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań). The second part of the book contains only one chapter (6): an essay, a kind of meta-reflection on the Polish university.

Individual dimensions of social capital in Dudzikowa's report are defined as networks of social relations, social and civil engagement, and generalised trust. The common dimension of social capital is implied as opportunities of the institution, which could be the basis for increasing individual social capital. The main goal of the team's research was to detect the most important factors stimulating the development of social capital at the university.

The research results reveal some difficulties in the process of building social capital through the modern Polish university. According to the researchers, the university has problems creating social capital. In their opinion, there exist unfavourable trends from the 'middle' level of social capital of the students, who start the process of study, and from the restricted educational approach of the university, which is prepared for passive learners much more than for active and critical students. The analysis of the opinions about the bonds and relationships reveals that students are taught social skills, such as trust, acceptance, and the ability to build the social cohesion of a group, in a very limited way. The relationship capital of students is described as only medium, and their social-engagement level and trust as low.

The results of the research could be surprising for people who still believe in the idea of the Humboldtian university as an institution with the highest standards of teaching. Dudzikowa, in her essay in the second part of the book, tries to explain additionally the medium level of the social capital at the university. In her opinion the destruction (or lack) of social capital at the university should be seen as the effect of many changes related to the professionalisation and commercialisation of the higher education system during the transition process in Poland. In the processes of professionalisation and commercialisation, the university is redefined as an institution with new goals: measurable effects of teaching and research. This means the destruction of the

social bonds of the academic community, which should be redefined as well.

In conclusion, in comparing both books it is apparent that social capital is very responsive and that it depends on meta-system factors (external and affecting the whole social system, such as political change, professionalisation, commercialisation) that could easily destroy it when the systems (economic, political, educational) are not stable enough. The main statements in both books are clear and well founded. Gajowiak's and Dudzikowa's analyses are complementary in many ways: one to another and both to the state of our knowledge hitherto, but there is one important difference. Only Dudzikowa shows a way to escape from the current dangerous situation. She points to the newer, self-organised structures based on virtual learning as new groups, which could have enough strength to rebuild or even construct the new social capital of Polish society.

Sposób cytowania:

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