

# **Social Capital and Democracy Under Threat**

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### **Abstract**

In several advanced democracies there are observers who express deep fears about indications of the undermining of ideals that support democratic institutions and practices. In Australia, the authors of *Silencing Dissent* and other critical books point to palpable signs of erosion in the democratic landscape as the system fails to hold the government properly to account. In the United States there are many authors who show that recent events have undermined the traditional commitment to freedom and government accountability. These include Sheldon Wolin, Benjamin Barber, Jeffrey Stout, Cornel West, Stephen Carter, Jim Wallis among many others. Robert Kraynak and Jean Bethke Elshtain have despaired over the attenuation of the social, cultural and religious traditions that they argue have cushioned the liberal state with habits of civility and toleration. This paper will attempt to suggest the possible recovery of traditions conducive to the wellbeing of modern democratic government.

It is a commonplace that democracy cannot persist without a high level of toleration on the part of the community. There is an 'ethos' disposed towards democracy, and it is sometimes associated with the maintenance of a strong 'civil society', meaning the plethora of institutions, organizations and associations in which people do their business and take their leisure. G. D. H. Cole once claimed for the English that their capacity for spontaneous group formation for particular ends was the source of the democratic genius (Cole 1941: 162). Adam Przeworski has engagingly said that democracy is a 'miracle': '...the miracle of democracy is that conflicting political forces obey the results of voting. People who have guns obey those without them. Incumbents risk their control of governmental offices

by holding elections. Losers wait for their chance to win office. Conflicts are regulated, processed according to rules, and thus limited.' (Przeworski 1999: 19).

The idea behind social capital is that the 'miracle' is sustained by the cooperative and reciprocal activities of people as members of groups throughout society. These bodies foster a spirit of cooperation within them that is somehow infiltrated into our orientation towards politics at the national and sub-national levels. The present turmoil in international politics is not a new experience to democracy; certainly the Second World War posed a world-wide threat to the efficacy and even to the existence of democracy, but that era of the European dictators also evoked in response some of the finest democratic thinking in the west. The current crisis in democracy stems largely from the turmoil following the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington in 2001, and the extraordinary measures taken by governments to deal with subsequent threats. The force of governmental responses surely puts to rest the myth of the decline of the state, but it also threatens the possibility of the decline of the *democratic* state.

If this assessment has any validity, it is important to interrogate concepts like 'social capital' for their efficacy in holding governments to account before the people. This paper considers discussions of the role of social capital as a ground of support for the democratic polity, and seeks to question whether this concept is entirely appropriate to the democratic ethos. It also asks whether there is a specific role for social capital in holding governments accountable.

What is it about traditions of law-abidingness that creates a stable polity? Why was it lacking in the Russia and Germany of the dictators? This last

question is hugely vexed, and beyond our present scope. Negative examples nevertheless exhibit a situation where the spirit of law-abidingness has broken down. ‘Social capital’ has been offered as a possible answer to the conundrum. Here it must be seen in its purely political garb, and distinguished from economic and sociological guises, even though there may be useful overlaps in the approach to this concept.

### **Social capital**

Although the term has a substantial history, appearing on a broad sociological canvas under the brush of James S. Coleman (1988), its recent political vogue has been associated largely with the work of Robert Putnam. Putnam closely associated social capital with ‘civic traditions’, especially in his study of democracy in Italy (Putnam 1992). There he considers the dysfunctionality of poor communal cooperation, and offers remedies in terms of the beneficial activities of ‘tower societies, guilds, mutual aid societies, cooperatives, unions, even soccer clubs and literary societies’ (Putnam 1992, 181). Turning to the United States in a later study, Putnam elaborates cooperation as ‘reciprocity’:

...social capital refers to connections among individuals — social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called ‘civic virtue’. The difference is that ‘social capital’ calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of

reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital (Putnam 2000, 19).

To add nuance to the function of social capital, Putnam discerns two main aspects: 'Bridging social capital' and 'bonding social capital'. In either case the function is to foster modes of reciprocity: the bridging variety spans cleavages across class, gender, racial and religious lines, and creates association among distant acquaintances that may be useful to collective action; bonding social capital forms 'a kind of sociological superglue' whereby intimate relationships are formed and 'strong in-group loyalty' is cemented (Putnam 2000, 23).

Putnam is well alert to the dangers of a negative view of social capital. A parallel form of superglue is supplied by honour among thieves, and American folklore and history are fecund in examples of bonding within terrorist gangs, Mafia families or the Ku Klux Klan. A kind of perverted social conscience led Timothy McVeigh to draw on a brand of social capital to murder many of his fellow citizens in Oklahoma City (Putnam 2000, 21-22). Putnam presents an exhaustive account of the benefits of social capital for political participation, but what is basically a politically neutral concept is somewhat vitiated by the contrary force of negative social capital. Something that admittedly produces antisocial behaviour is doubtfully adduced in support of democracy (cf. Paxton 2002, 255). Pamela Paxton endeavours to confine social capital to those associational links which encourage democratic behaviour, but that is to run counter to those theories which objectify group life as the primary constituent of 'civil society' (Paxton

2002: 256). Putnam himself acknowledges the continuity of his own discussion with a much older debate about ‘civil society’.

In short, social capital is ‘the collective value of all “social networks” and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other’. Despite the difficulty of quantifying *value* and *inclinations*, Putnam discerns a palpable decline in social capital. He derives the observation, from copious examples of the drop in membership of various groups and societies in America, first that citizens’ friendly ‘inclinations’ have subsided under the pressures of work time, the almost universal demand to make more money, and the desire to advance in one’s career. Second, the ungoverned growth of the ‘suburban sprawl’ has removed people from close habitation near centres of cooperation and interaction, while the increasing time taken to commute to work reduces opportunities for neighbourhood converse. Third, the rapid growth of electronic entertainment is typically privatizing and insulating. In itself, these developments pose a threat to democracy in Putnam’s view. Is it better met by ‘social capital’ than by ‘civil society’?

### **Social capital and civil society**

The particular virtue of considering civil society is its structural objectivity in forming the sort of society that conduces to democratic forms of government, or at least as a point of resistance to authoritarian government. In the age of the European dictators much pains were taken to make the state itself, particularly as represented by the personality of the leader (Schapiro 1972), the focus of all

loyalty and authority (Friedrich and Brzezinski 1967; Friedrich, Curtis and Barber 1969). No effort was spared in suppressing organizations that supplied a sense of identity other than the state itself, or at least, as with the universities or the church of the 'German Christians', for example, bringing them under the wing of the state. This gave the pointer to the role of such organizations in containing, if not undermining, the authority of the state under normal circumstances. Hannah Arendt did much to show how the reduction of the citizen body to an undifferentiated 'mob' as a byproduct of bourgeois society facilitated the rise of the leadership state which could make itself the focus of all identity for the mass (Arendt 1968, 35-36). In this light, the very existence of all sorts of societies and associations, from churches, unions, guilds and cooperatives right down to local choral societies, bridge clubs and Putnam's favoured bowling clubs, regardless of their political orientation or lack of it, set up a kind of honeycombed buffer against the claims of the state. A Centre for Civil Society in Australia promotes the term as referring 'to the relationships and associations that make up our life at grass-roots levels of society, independent of government (in families, neighbourhoods and voluntary associations) (Centre for Civil Society 2007). Traditional views stress the independence of citizens from government. As Michael Oakeshott once observed, '...the civil condition and a state understood in terms of civil association postulates self-determined autonomous human beings seeking the satisfaction of their wants in self-chosen transactions with others of their kind' (Oakeshott 1975: 314-315). In this regard, whether the practices or orientations of the groups are directed to democratic purposes or not is irrelevant.

In any case, it is an important theoretical feature of democracy that it persistently refuses to hold the state to be an end in itself.

Classic statements such as those of Arendt and Oakeshott have rather faded from the modern theoretical view. Civil society now often applies mainly to the activities of Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs), which are given much of the credit for helping bring down the authoritarian governments behind the Iron Curtain in the late nineteen-eighties. With the ensuing triumph of capitalism, however, the whole notion of 'civil society', and especially the role of NGOs, began to suffer a 'backlash', which only intensified after the United States declared a global war on terror following the attacks on New York and Washington in 2001. Given that this backlash has occurred not only in surviving authoritarian states, but also in 'managed democracies' and in advanced democracies engaged in the war on terror, the question whether democracy is under threat gains in urgency (Howell, Ishkanian, Obadare Seckinelgin and Glasius 2006, 7-8). It also raises questions about Putnam's construction of a democracy to whose service he enlists social capital.

Civil society and social capital are closely allied in the relevant literature. If we take an older, more classical view of civil society, it may be differentiated from the more recent social capital by relieving it of the obligation to be assessed in terms of positive and reciprocal relations. There is an objective dimension to the part played by civil society, by its mere existence, in diluting the claims of the state.

### **Democracy redefined**

Putnam's democracy focuses sharply on citizen participation, from mere voting to full engagement with public organizations that foster democratic activity. Yet it is doubtful whether such a conception as *social* capital is entirely appropriate for an America given over to private capitalist enterprise on the one hand and a massive public commitment to the war machine on the other. The glaring internal contradiction of the term is often overlooked. Yet it points to a capitalism that, in America, rose in concert with an implicit redefinition of democracy in the United States. The transition from what we might call a classical conception of democracy, which invests much in citizen participation, to 'elite government', was long in the making, but was given a considerable boost by the federalist formation of the national constitution. Studying the nature of colonial localities in New England, the political scientist Joshua Miller claimed that a clear distinction had to be made between 'democracy' and 'liberalism' (Miller 1991: 57-74); the Constitution of the United States was a distinctly liberal document highly resistant to the practice of democracy as it had been known in the colonial era (Miller 1998; Burns 1963; Dahl 2003; Wood 2003: 152).

Once democracy had acquired to its universal cachet of approval, some serious redefinition of the nature of democracy had to take place. Introducing a new paradigm to liberal studies, Joyce Appleby reformulated democracy, not as the people taking part in government, but as the opportunity for 'the people' to go about their private business relatively free from interference by the government

(Appleby 1986, 25). Appleby's approach accorded well with earlier empirical studies that indicated that democracy was in reality 'elite competition' (Schumpeter 1954) and that it worked best when the people were kept remote from its detailed processes (Berelson in Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee 1954: 306-323). Modern studies of liberalism did not tend towards the exclusion of the people from democratic processes, but they often diverted attention from the 'social' aspect of political behaviour. The work of John Rawls generated a seemingly endless debate to this day (Tampio 2007) over the true nature of the liberal society (Rawls 1999). In particular, his rationalist approach was said to view social relationships as timeless, as cut off from social realities, including their antecedents, and concentrated too heavily, along with many other studies on liberalism, on individuals as separate, 'atomized', units (Charvet 1995). His position 'is rooted in the self-interest driven principles of abstract justice formed by isolated, presocial individuals operating through a veil of ignorance as to their own position in society. It emphasizes the primacy of the individual, and the social features stem primarily from the aggregate decisions of individual selves stripped of any particular attributes' (Rosenthal 1996: 101). An important earlier critic, and a proponent of Putnam's companion concept, 'community', Michael Sandel, argued that Rawls's theory

rules out the possibility that common purposes and ends could inspire more or less expansive self-understandings and so define a community in the constitutive sense, a community describing the subject and not just the

objects of shared aspirations. More generally, Rawls' account rules out the possibility of what we might call 'intersubjective' or 'intrasubjective' forms of self-understanding, ways of conceiving the subject that do not assume its bounds to be given in advance (Sandel 1982: 62).

In particular, Rawls's concerns about the effects on political life of 'comprehensive doctrines' convinced many that religious argument should be excluded from the public square (Rawls 1993: 174-175).

### **Religion as social capital**

Nevertheless, given that religion is in Putnam's terms a significant constituent of social capital, it is appropriate to postpone briefly a conclusion as to whether 'social capital' adequately explains the support for a democratic polity. The place of religion in international civil society is evident

...when we turn our attention away from radical religious mobilization, and toward transnational religious participation in global institutional politics, about which social scientists have been largely silent. This omission cannot be explained in terms of any lack of religious involvement in global institutions. On the contrary, in recent years, religious groups have wielded considerable influence in the drafting of United Nations documents pertaining to a variety of issues such as human rights for women, HIV/AIDS, and population and development. Similarly, since the mid-

1990s, the World Bank has sponsored conferences aimed at bringing religious leadership into closer dialogue with the Bank and the international development community. The European Commission likewise has been the site of concerted efforts to allow religious leaders and communities to influence ‘the meaning, spiritual direction, and ethical dimension of European unification and the policies developed in this context’ (Bush 2007: 1645 and quoting Jansen 2000: 104).

Putnam holds that ‘faith communities in which people worship together are arguably the single most important repository of social capital in America’ (Putnam 2000: 66). Beyond Putnam, however, there is a growing body of opinion that argues for religion not merely as the ‘most important repository’, but as uniquely different in kind from other forms of association. Religious teaching grounds the orientation of believers to the outside world in a way that is qualitatively different from other types of organization (Smidt 2003: 2-3). This insight is complex, because it arouses the very objections that liberals often pose against religious belief, namely, that it subordinates the individual person’s will to some outside authority, and therefore reduces his or her autonomy. The religious person may or may not answer to such a charge, since for some denominations total submission to God’s will is a matter of implicit obedience to scripture or to church instruction; for others, ‘free in obedience’ is an ambiguous term that few would allow to mean the surrender of personal autonomy or responsibility. Such obedience is a deep and compelling desire to do what is right by church or

scriptural teaching, but to do so under personal interpretation of that teaching within the context of a social framework wider than the religious organization itself.

To consider church congregations as utilitarian organizations serving the wider community, however, it is argued that churches supply a support network across a range of services to needy members, including not only a network of social interactions, but also when necessary material subsistence such as food, clothing and shelter for those in deep need. This welfare work is evident particularly in inner urban areas where other supportive networks and help organizations have collapsed, and where only the church survives, or indeed, where new churches have been planted in order precisely to offer that kind of support as a religious mission. In the American context, by way of contrast to the European, government is generally held in low esteem, and is much less looked to for providing welfare infrastructure. Thus it is argued

(1) that it is normative for most congregations that they be involved in social and community service provision; (2) that religious congregations are, in fact, highly concerned with the quality of life of others in their neighbourhood and beyond in that they often form the basic social safety net that helps those who are unable to provide for their own basic needs; and (3) that active participation in local religious congregations is a key element for acquiring human and social capital, the necessary tools for civic engagement (Cnaan, Boddie and Yancie 2003: 19-20).

Despite the low level of expectation about government providence, Mark Warren shows how religious bodies have organized politically to demand more help from government and big business on behalf of poor communities. He describes the success of a 'faith-based' campaign organized in Texas by the coalition called Communities Organized for Public Service through which millions of dollars were pledged for job training programs and housing loans in poor neighbourhoods. This kind of effort actually engages otherwise indifferent people in direct political action: 'Religious institutions can play a particularly important role in equalizing political participation because they are sites where people of color and low-income people have the opportunity to learn skills that can be translated to politics, skills like letter writing, speech making, and how to plan and make decisions in meetings' (Warren 2003: 51).

The 'uniqueness' of this claim raises the justified objection that it is not only 'religious' people who work for altruistic causes. In Australia, since the impact of severe legislation against asylum seekers has fallen heavily on many consciences, we have witnessed the spontaneous growth of (secular) groups entirely dedicated to the welfare of refugees and giving legal assistance, moral support and financial aid to asylum seekers. We have seen the rise of groups dedicated to the preservation of democratic traditions in our society, and the causes could be multiplied. The 'uniqueness' of the church's position is nevertheless defended on the grounds that it is an abiding institution, embodying its own long traditions, and bound together by a devotion which stands beyond the

immediate causes. While the secular special service groups make outstanding contributions, and offer the byproduct of friendship among those who work together, it is often difficult to maintain enthusiasm and commitment over a long period of time, especially when appeals to political authority so often fall on deaf ears. The churches continue their institutional existence for religious purposes, and it is the religious teaching that enjoins action for justice. It is here worth noting that quite often the leadership of the secular help groups is given by people first motivated by their own religious convictions. None of this is in any way to belittle the contribution of people of 'secular' good conscience, but it does demonstrate the substance of ongoing institutional support both for beneficent intentions and for social activism.

Sometimes religious organization can have political consequences of great democratic moment. As Paxton points out, social capital 'provides a space' for the generation and transmission of ideas independent of the ruling elite. The role of churches in this regard was never more powerfully demonstrated than in the insurrection in East Germany that brought down the Communist regime and led to the destruction of the Berlin Wall. There 'The church became a host institution for a number of single-issue causes, and sponsored numerous groups dedicated to discussion of human rights, ecology, women's issues, the position of homosexuals and the problem of underdevelopment in Third World countries' (Moses 1991: 129; cf. Conway 1990; Burgess 1990). It was from church meetings that many of the rebellious streamed to the final confrontation with the government. Similar

accounts could be offered of the churches' revolutionary role elsewhere, such as in Poland, Russia, South Africa, the Philippines or Brazil.

Anticipating such work as that of Smidt and his colleagues, Putnam himself assigned a peculiar role to the churches as 'one of the few vital institutions left in which low-income, minority, and disadvantaged citizens of all races can learn politically relevant skills and be recruited to political action. The implication is vital to anyone who values egalitarian democracy: without such institutions, the class bias in American politics would be much greater' (Putnam 2000: 339).

In considering what was earlier claimed to be the 'unique' social position of the churches, we need to recognize their foundation in the very 'comprehensive doctrines' that John Rawls at first thought should be excluded from all political discourse. Rawls was generally criticized for neglecting such institutions and associations of acculturation that are here considered under the rubric 'social capital' (Massaro 1996: 770-772). He met these criticisms in subsequent work that acknowledged that people's ideals can be rooted in 'comprehensive doctrines' (Rawls 1993), but he continued to insist that such doctrines, which were capable of leading to emotional and irrational public outbursts, should be kept aloof from the political arena, unless they formed part of an 'overlapping consensus'. This apparent exclusion of possibly eccentric or minority comprehensive doctrines would seem to be an ironic reversal of the very foundations of liberalism (Murphy 1998: 274), unless Rawls were to invoke a harsh and restrictive version of Mill's 'harm principle'. As Andrew Murphy says,

an overlapping consensus was in fact a *liberal* consensus, while his intent is, 'at worst, a scheme of repression and self-censorship which renders comprehensive doctrines meaningless' (Murphy 1998: 250).

A vigorous defender of democracy, Cornel West, a professor of Religion at Princeton, demonstrates how 'mainstream' religious teaching has led to some of the most significant political movements, and radical change, in recent history, particularly in regard to race relations. While rejecting Constantinian imperialism, which he says is reflected in the Bush presidency, he avers that 'to be a Christian...is to love wisdom, love justice, and love freedom' (West 2004: 172). He believes that the greatest political development in America was the emergence of the Civil Rights movement under Rev. Martin Luther King. For West, King embodied the conjunction between Christianity and democracy:

When he said that bombs dropped on Vietnam also landed in American ghettos — and in white Appalachia, on yellow street corners, in red lands, brown barrios, or black hoods — he was highlighting the close link between empire, class, and race; between imperial wars, wealth inequality, and racist practices. He died because his vision and courage were simply too much for the nihilists to stand — especially the FBI. His life — the intersection of love and democracy — constituted the most powerful threat to the mendacity and hypocrisy of the nihilists drunk with power, driven by greed, or blind to a more democratic future (West 2004: 57-58).

It is ironic that the very toleration Rawls's liberalism insists upon has its roots in unequivocally comprehensive doctrines that he himself is reluctant to tolerate. The religious basis of John Locke's letters on toleration cannot be questioned, but the root of the matter goes further back into Locke's puritan predecessors (Locke 1983; cf. Waldron 2002: 208-214). In the English Revolution of the 1640s there arose huge controversies between the Independents, who, as in Milton's *Areopagitica* (1951), demanded free speech, and the Presbyterians who, fearing the vulgar excesses of rampant congregationalism, demanded that approved publications be 'licensed'. Not yet knowing about 'comprehensive doctrines', the authors of the revolutionary era nevertheless knew that one's innermost beliefs could be neither inculcated nor changed by compulsion. Murphy cites pamphlets of William Walwyn and Richard Overton that 'separated understanding from the will', and quotes Leonard Busher to say that one cannot 'command faith', all these dating from 1646 (Murphy 1998: 255). From New England the Separatist founders of the colony of Rhode Island, Roger Williams and John Clarke, insisted on a charter for their colony that prohibited the control of conscientious religious worship by secular authorities, and in his complaints against the repressive policies of Massachusetts he put forth an impassioned, if somewhat wild, argument for toleration (Williams 1664). Clarke published his 1652 apologia, *Ill Newes from New-England: or A Narrative of New-Englands Persecution*. He claimed that a person's conscience could only be schooled by 'convincing, converting, transforming, and as it were a new creating of them', but never by force. 'The voice of each man's conscience', he said, is 'to him as is the voice of

his God.’ (Gaustad 1980). Theodore D. Bozeman recalls: ‘As when crafting the language of “full libertie” for the Rhode Island Charter of 1663, Clarke seemed not to limit freedom’s reach; and in *Ill Newes* he had extended it explicitly to “Hereticks, Schismaticks, Apostats, [and] Blasphemers”’ (Bozeman 2006: 70-71). Clarke was well ahead of J. S. Mill’s ‘marketplace of ideas’ when he argued that truth could compete successfully with falsehood in an uncoerced climate.

As a comprehensive doctrine a person’s religion is held by many ‘social capital’ theorists, not least Putnam himself, to be almost a paradigm of the kind of organized belief that shores up civil society. Writing on ‘determinants of social capital’, however, Marcus Alexander questions the importance of religion (Alexander 2007). His empirical study finds a negative correlation between the growth of church attendance and levels of social capital, suggesting also that church attendance and related activities might reduce the time available for other, presumably more socially constructive, activities. Yet this very suggestion points up the limitation of empirical studies on such questions, since it is clear that in all developed countries rising church attendance has been taking place in Pentecostal churches, which demonstrably proffer a narrowly conservative view of politics. In the United States, George W. Bush was powerfully supported by the so-called ‘religious right’, which expected him to act on their strictures against abortion, stem cell research, feminism, gay marriage and ideals promoted by the American Civil Liberties Union. In Australia the recent census has confirmed a decline in attendance at ‘mainstream’ Christian churches, while in Sydney, at least, there has been a rapid growth in Pentecostal religion. It is incontrovertible that Pentecostal

churches foster community within their own congregations, but judging from both American and Australian examples, their public attitude to politics has been narrowly conservative, and could be called ‘anti-liberal’. The matter is reinforced by a pervasive antipathy within conservative churches to so-called ‘liberal theology’ (M. Maddox 2005).

A further question to be put to empirical studies is using church *attendance* as the measure of community adherence to ideals and values propagated by church teachings over the centuries. To do so would be to commit the error laid at the feet of Rawls, that a snapshot frozen in time scarcely reveals the complexity of tradition and inheritance in the makeup of any person or human organization. The allegedly languishing mainstream churches have a long history, and a long interaction with western society. Their contribution is not measured by present church attendance numbers, but the by qualitative input of ideals and values that have been irrigating western society for centuries. Behind them lies an enormous body of philosophical religious speculation and a large corpus of high scholarship in political theology; there is also the perpetual interaction of church leaders with political elites. The extent of church influence is not measurable. It rests alongside other sources of ideals as found in liberal public education and scholarship of the Enlightenment and post enlightenment sources. Even the Enlightenment was said to have absorbed ideals that were ‘heavenly’ (Becker 1932).

Vaclav Havel once averred that liberal ideals could not survive without help from outside liberalism itself. People required ‘cosmic anchoring’, which

entailed acknowledgement of the Jewish teaching that the human is made in the image of God (Havel 1995). This interpretation of religious influence has had a startling endorsement from one who could have had no vested interest in making the acknowledgement he did. Richard Rorty, a confirmed and outspoken atheist, persistently spoke of the moral imperative to treat other people with respect. He acknowledged that this accorded with the teachings of the Bible in old and new manifestations: ‘This Jewish and Christian element in our tradition is gratefully acknowledged by freeloading atheists like myself’ (Rorty 1985: 220). Political scientist Robert Kraynak marvels at this incredible contradiction: all Rorty’s work seemed set to undermine the foundations of conceptions of the greatest good as the basis of justice, yet he realized that the very ideals of liberalism were ultimately traceable to this source. (Kraynak 2001: 36). Referring to the religious tributary of moral teaching and example, Rorty’s long-term interlocutor and adversary, Jean Bethke Elshtain, asked plaintively, ‘How long before the stream runs dry?’ (in Stout 2004: 307).

### **Social capital or democratic tradition?**

The crucial questions remain: are we witnessing an erosion of social capital? If so, can the trend be reversed? And indeed, is ‘social capital’ a suitable term for the phenomenon we have been discussing?

Is ‘social capital’ the appropriate signifier for the democratic ethos? There are doubts. In the first place, capital suggests the commodification of the democratic ethos, whereas the things that really matter in the shoring up of democracy are not readily susceptible of scientific quantification. In the second

place, capital, with or without the ‘social’ qualifier, directs us into the *private* world of accumulation and monetary exchange. Undoubtedly there are things to aid our public institutions that money can buy, but the stress in ‘social’ is on the public square, about things held in common. Moreover, a discussion of the ethos cushioning democracy inquires into things quite apart from monetary considerations. They undoubtedly have budgetary implications, but describing public funds in terms of ‘capital’ is dubious. Thirdly, ‘capital’ is indissolubly connected to a type of economics and a particular version of politics, mainly conservative or neo-conservative, or ‘Liberal’, that tilts the discussion in favour of one ideological position. Democratic government implies openness to an array of opinion, to a number of conflicting ‘no-fault’ policy solutions and to a range of conflicting ideologies. The ‘capital’ in ‘social capital’ diverts emphasis away from public goods.<sup>1</sup>

Even though the coming of the Constitution of the United States, as a liberal victory over classical democracy, necessitated the American redefinition of democracy, much to exclude the participatory role of the people, there is value in cleaving to the democratic component of liberal democracy. It is not simply a matter of following Dunn’s ‘insistent power’ of the word (Dunn 2005), but to recognize that inevitably the term itself is a conveyor of meaning beyond itself, a carrier of experience relieving us of the need to define its implications from scratch, or take instantaneous snapshots of its present working as though that were

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<sup>1</sup> The associated term, ‘moral capital’, raises similar difficulties, even though it is free from the internal contradiction of ‘social capital’. See Kane 2001; Sison 2003.

all there was to it (Sartori 1987: 288-289). In this sense the word becomes akin to the social capital with which it is now so often associated, although the accumulated 'capital' is much deeper and much older than empirical studies can convey. Even in America the heritage of New England direct democracy is not entirely obliterated, and that provides a well of heritage that social critics such as Sheldon Wolin (1981), Benjamin Barber (1995) or Stephen Carter (1998) can draw upon endlessly.

Of special importance in this context is Jeffrey Stout's view of democracy as 'tradition'. Words like 'tradition' are often scornfully dismissed, even by conservative politicians, especially when they do not want to be reminded of past failures. The rhetoric is then trained 'on the future, not the past'. Yet this limiting discourse is a symptom of the declining ethos of public civility, or, as Putnam might say, a diminution of social capital, while the wider, generous connotations of democracy are ruled off into the margins. Jeffrey Stout follows a path different from the usual political history by drawing on the store of American literature to illustrate the building of a democratic tradition. It is therefore not so much the democratic institutions and practices of New England that he traces, but, in a kind of unstated parallel with the democratic experience of ancient Athens, the literature that was inspired and facilitated by the actual democratic milieu of New England. His mentors are Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, John Dewey and, in political terms, the administration of the New Deal, now under persistent conservative attack (Janeway 2004).

Political withdrawal may be tempting under the attenuation of edifying traditions; Stout does not succumb, but endeavours to restore the ethos which built up the conditions for democracy in the first place. He taxes his own Christian mentors (though he himself is not a Christian) for following too literally biblical precepts to withdraw from the world — Stanley Hauerwas, who argues that Christians are merely ‘sojourners’ in this life, and that their efforts should be concentrated on building up the internal strength of the church at the expense of contributing to the wider, ‘fallen’ world (Hauerwas and Willimon 1989); Alasdair MacIntyre, who despaired of justice ever being truly followed again in a world of fragmented discourse (MacIntyre 1988); and John Milbank, who attributed secularization to theological error rather than to the outworking of religious liberty (Milbank 1990).

Stout’s traditionalism runs headlong into social contract explanations of political organization, taxing the contract with a static view of the polity. This very point draws him into controversy with Rawls, who, he charges, equates personal reasonableness with acceptance of the political contract. Like critics we have encountered earlier in the paper, he holds Rawls’s moral strictures against the expression of religious ideals to be scarcely liberal. Likewise in the manner of his colleague, Cornel West, Stout calls M. L. King to witness to the political legitimacy of ‘comprehensive doctrines’. King is numbered among those ‘more deeply committed to freedom’ than to ‘subject themselves to the policing or self-censorship of religious expression in the political arena’ (Stout 2004: 84-85). While rejecting Rawls’s ‘freestanding justice’ and his ‘loaded account of

reasonableness', Stout nevertheless accepts wholeheartedly, as a way of renewal for democracy, Rawls's insistence that we owe one another reasons for our decisions and our actions, holding each other mutually responsible for our political stands, and giving due respect to our political rivals (Stout 2004: 183-184).

- Although Stout does not go down this path, the very obligation to give one another reasons implicitly recalls one of the defining characteristics of classical democracy, right back to the ancient Athenians, the requirement that political action be preceded by free, open and thoughtful discussion.

### **Democracy under threat**

Putnam's assessment of the decline in American social capital points to a decaying foundation for contemporary democracy. Now we are constantly reminded that 'the world is not the same' since the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington in 2001. A little reflection will remind that the world is the same, and that terrorism has long been a political weapon. What has changed is the recognition that the west, often the perpetrator of terrorist strikes, like Clinton's bombing of Khartoum, is not immune to violence. Yet the American attacks, and the reaction to them, have drawn the religious tradition into serious questioning. 'Indeed, the Global War on Terror, which was launched immediately following the September 11 attacks, provided a language for justifying a backlash against civil society. It created a climate of fear and suspicion, the demonization and criminalization of particular communities and their organizations, and the partial

silencing of political dissent in the US and in other Western states which had become or could potentially become targets of terrorist attacks' (Howell, Ishkanian, Obadare, Seckinelgin and Glasius 2006: 11). These authors go on to argue that 'the various antiterror laws and anti-money laundering regulations that have been passed since 11 September have been intended to enhance national security and to provide greater oversight over funds collected and distributed by civil society organizations. The general querying of civil society and the passage of anti-terror legislation is creating a chill factor which leads to self-censorship among civil society organizations and greater conservatism, regulation, and oversight from donors [of aid]' (Howell, Ishkanian, Obadare, Seckinelgin and Glasius 2006: 22).

Repeatedly the public is told that it is Muslim extremists who are the problem, and although George W. Bush recoiled from his original gaffe of announcing a 'crusade' against the enemy, his initial response was cloaked in religious garb (G. Maddox 2003). His first reaction to the attack was to call together a panel of religious leaders to advise him, before the matter was discussed in Congress! He soon announced that he was on the warpath against an 'axis of evil', a metaphor clearly intended to clothe him in righteousness. It is clear that insofar as born-again Bush's warmongering was motivated by religion, rather than simply the control of oil supplies, or the strategic domination of the Middle East, it was distinctly the self-righteous version of his right-wing backers. The 'mainstream' churches, led by the Catholic bishops, campaigned strenuously against the invasion of Iraq, to no avail.

There is reason to believe that the response to September 11, 2001, may be of greater threat to democracy than the unquestionably brutal terrorist attacks in the US, Britain, Spain, Indonesia, Pakistan and elsewhere. In an atmosphere where the population is distracted by terror, Jeffrey Stout deplores the rise of a different kind of elite that has tried to roll back the economic, political and cultural achievements of the Roosevelt Administration, and discovers an America that has ignored the poor, supported conveniently friendly dictators, participated in the killing of innocent civilians abroad and refused to mourn the tragedy, has failed to hold elites accountable to the people, has engendered a spirit of deference to bosses, has preferred material gain to justice, and has for the most part 'withdrawn from politics into docility, apathy or despair' (Stout 2004: 24).

The distractions of a war on terror have also ruffled the waters of Australian democracy. The case has been largely made by the authors of *Silencing Dissent* (Hamilton and Maddison eds 2007), whose disturbing revelations need not be recounted here.

The Australian Prime Minister's implication in George Bush's foreign policies pushes him into hazard of the criticisms Stout made of his contemporary America. Complicity in the war against Iraq, and the turmoil that has followed the invasion (Hil and Wilson 2007), raise questions for Australian democracy, particularly in regard to the manner in which the war was entered (Wilkie 2003; Duncan 2003). And it has implicated all citizens in this failed enterprise. It has (rightly) denigrated Saddam Hussein, but remained silent about the other tyrants America has conveniently supported. Several authors have documented the

growing disregard of due parliamentary procedures, and the suppression of the truth about asylum seekers (Marr 2007; Kevin 2006; Marr and Wilkinson 2003; Weller 2002).

Do these developments justify the ‘democracy under threat’ of the title of this paper? It is hard to disagree with Jeffrey Stout’s analysis about American society, although he is far from pessimistic about its prospects. Putnam’s fears are tempered by his possible remedies for waning social capital (Putnam 2000: 402-414). Barber and Wolin have perhaps been more severe in their assessment of American democracy (Barber 1995; Wolin 1993). If American democracy is beset by informed doubts, these concerns surely also apply to Australia, where we can witness similar erosions. The ‘miracle’ has not yet been shattered by the refusal of those in power to accept defeat at the hands of the electorate, although we came close in 1975 when those out of power refused to respect the results of the previous election. The 1975 crisis has become a negative part of our democratic inheritance, since it taught the illegitimate use of power and dismissed ‘conventions of the constitution’ as a cipher rather than a shorthand expression for behaviour according to democratic norms. The Thrasymachian lesson of the crisis was that in politics one may do whatever one can get away with.

Behind the shadow of protracted crisis lies the brighter image of Australian colonial democracy, an encouraging tradition. It of course had its own dark clouds of racism and white supremacism, but in terms of political processes it was an example to the world, a story too familiar to be repeated here. Australia

entered the era of Federation with considerable accumulated experience, and the 'social capital' of Australian democracy runs back at least to the 1850s.

There is undoubtedly *something* in the national experience that is conducive to democracy in some countries but absent in others. Putnam's analysis of America focuses on changes in manners and mores in the general population, whereas the focus in Australia has been on the behaviour of political elites in terms of the leeway given them by the electorate.

### **Conclusion: the recovery of democratic tradition**

Despite the danger of its dismissal as 'nostalgic' or 'retrospective', Jeffrey Stout's association of democracy with its tradition would seem to give a more appropriate account of the popular attributes that sustain democracy than does social capital. It can embrace both habits of compliance and the will to resistance, along with habituation to law-abidingness as long as the law is legitimate and embodies justice.

In view of the danger of dismissal, it may be necessary to promote the validity of 'tradition' with some vigour. The term is dynamic, implying a handing on, a conservation, evaluation and sifting of past knowledge and experience, of using that knowledge and experience for the benefit of sound policy and the strengthening of democratic procedures in the present, and refining the legacy in the light of the outcome of present action so that new interpretations and understandings may be handed forward; also the encouragement of new generations to understand their present condition by informed reference to their

antecedents and, in Burkean fashion, to value the wisdom (and avoid the follies) of the past. Any inherent conservatism associated with the mention of Burke is countered by the dynamism of a concept which can point to the evaluation of the past to fashion genuine innovation and experiment. At the same time, the charge of 'nostalgia' should be resisted as incompatible with the attitude being advanced here.

Democratic tradition is preferred to social capital first, for its explanatory force, but second, because it informs democratic practice in a more explicitly directed way than does social capital. Putnam's social capital, while embedded in reciprocal relations and modes of cooperation, is peripheral to democratic practice at the political level, and it is admitted to apply also to antisocial organizations. Its internal contradiction is also problematic. Civil society is even less explicitly directed to democratic practice than is social capital, but it forms the indispensable condition of a society in which democracy may flourish. To revivify democratic tradition we need reinforced educational curricula that enliven the bones of 'civics' with heroic examples of democratic leadership. Although there are very worthy exceptions, our day to political commentators subject us to a continuous narrative of personal machination and intrigue while little regard is paid to the democratic context of political activity. Without too much effort, these narratives could be contextualized to point up the democratic significance of political action. In addition, whereas church bodies serve the 'civil society' aspect of democratic society by their mere existence, their teaching is a treasurehouse of concern for peacemaking, justice and care for the

underprivileged, all of which are surely consonant with democratic ideals, and deserve forceful articulation in the public square. Along with opposition politicians, journalists and church spokespeople have a responsibility to hold governments publicly to account. What is recommended here is a combination of a flourishing civil society as an objective cellular bulwark against authoritarian government, and a tradition of public life, enmeshed with educational systems, religious bodies and open journalistic commentary, that remembers and transmits the highest ideals of democracy, that continuously educates the community about the explicit benefits of living under a democratic regime, and that exhorts to vigilance against any deviations from democratic ideals.

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